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THE VERDICT OF THE GODS

SARATH KUMAR GHOSH

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The Verdict of the Gods

The Verdict of the Gods

By

Sarath Kumar Ghosh

Illustrated

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Dedicated

not to

The "Great King" or the Story-teller

but to

The Great King, King of Kings, Supreme Ruler

that is

Shah-in-Shah, Padishah

That some day he may restore in his own person the glory of Akbar and Prithiraj and Vikrama, and gather around his throne "The Nine Gems of Ind."

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Prologue

THE Great King lay sick upon his crystal couch; his hand beat weary time upon the silken sheets; a soft-handed slave held a goblet of cool sherbet; another a dish of scented *pan;* another a tray of delicate sweetmeats. And another, standing at the head of the couch, wafted a fan of fragrant *kuskus* to soothe his fevered brow.

But the Great King was sick unto death.

A hundred beautiful handmaids had sung to him from behind pinjra-lattice with *esthraj*, *saringi* and *sethar*. A hundred lordlings had come to him and upon their knees had praised the virtues of his four-score ancestors, saying that he was the Son of the Gods. A hundred sages had gathered around him and quoted the sacred Vedas, saying that the Son of the Gods was also the Son of immortality and could never die.

Prologue

But the Great King was sick unto death.

Then, at the hour of night, the royal physician bethought him of a wondrous cure. There dwelt by the palace-gate a white-haired man—a skilful weaver of pearls of words and an enchanter of the mind. He sent for the Story-teller to beguile the Great King in his weary hours. The Great King was sick unto death, his heart full of thoughts of death. Perchance the Story-teller might send new hope into his heart.

"Tell me, O Wise One," asked the King from his pillow, "the most wonderful tale thou knowest of human peril. The nine rows of pearls around my neck shall be thy reward."

"To hear is to obey, O Light of the Universe!" replied the Story-teller, bowing his head even to the fringe of the golden quilt. Then seating himself upon the carpet, he began this tale. I, the faithful chronicler of the Great King, listening from the other side of the couch, have written it here in such words as you may understand, O best beloved readers!

Chapter One

IN THE GARDEN OF THE PALACE

KNOW, O Splendour of the Earth, that when thy slave was but a youth, there dwelt on the thrice-blessed land that lies between the sacred waters of the Jumna and the Gangese, a king who had an only child, a daughter, who was unto him as the apple of his eye.

The Princess Devala was a wondrous beauty; a houri of paradise, a peri of Indra's court. At her birth the Goddesses Parvathi, Sarasathi, and Lakshmi had endowed her with their celestial gifts. Her eyes were like black diamonds, her lips like red rubies; her face shone like creamy gold, and her hair like a raven's wing.

The king swore by the ashes of his forefathers that no prince was yet born worthy to mate with her. So he kept her in her maidenhood till past her seventeenth year. She played

with her maids in the *champak* groves and lotus beds that surrounded the garden-house of the palace. But no face of man had she seen—save her father's.

Then the king, going forth one evening to gaze upon the setting sun, stood by a pool adjoining his daughter's apartments. His bosom was smooth as the water at his feet. But suddenly it became a raging sea. Chancing to look upon the pool somewhat on one side he saw the reflection of a scene—something that went like a sword to his heart, something that dried up the blood in his face.

He looked up and saw. There stood the Princess Devala at her unbarred window—alone—unveiled. There was a smile upon her lips and a love-light in her eyes.

Beneath the window stood a young man, his face uplifted, his hands upon his breast. Eyes calling to eyes, heart yearning for heart. Enough!

The cry of anguish that broke from the king made the princess turn. She threw up her

hands suddenly, as if to avert some impending doom—then fell back fainting.

The young man came and knelt by the king. He thrust out his neck and awaited the blow. But the king still played with the hilt of his sword.

"Strike, O King!" cried out the youth in the agony of suspense. "Why dost thou not strike?"

"Fear not, O miserable one!" spoke the king, in a level voice. "The earth will soon drink thy blood! But it is not meet that my untarnished blade should spill it."

He clapped his hands, and a dozen guards appeared.

"Draw thy tulwar," he bade the foremost, "and sever that head."

The menial swung his heavy tulwar, held it aloft a moment—then suddenly dropped the point to the ground.

"I cannot!" he muttered between his teeth. "This man hath a charm!"

The king silently motioned to the second

guard. But he likewise could not strike, crying out: "This man is protected by a spirit!"

And so the third and the fourth, and all the rest unto the twelfth. Some mystic force held their arms—so they averred. Perchance it was merely that they had recognised the man.

He was Narayan Lal, the juggler of the king; his father, the great Hira Lal of Benares, had been the Court juggler before him. Thus perchance by his arts had he effected the meeting with the princess, which no other man could; and thus also, perhaps, had he now infused some subtle fear into the hearts of his executioners.

"Give me thy sword," the king bade the nearest guard; "myself will deal the blow."

But the youth raised his head and said to the king:

"Strike with thine own blade, O King! I am of Kshattric blood!"

"It is false! Thou art the son, the unworthy son, of Hira Lal, my bondsman."

"The reputed son, O King! A Rajput

father gave me life!" He flung back his head, and looked his master full in the face. Even a king could not spill Rajput blood in ignominy.

"But I nursed thee at my bosom, fed thee with my smiles, and clothed thee with my favours. And thou are a traitor most perjured. Thou hast brought shame upon my beard."

This was his first allusion to the crime of the youth that the by-standers could divine.

"The full moon may shine upon an earth-worm, O King!"

"But the earth-worm may not cry out to the full moon!"

He was not an earth-worm. He called himself that to measure his lot by that of the princess.

"The Kshattrics are of royal caste, O King!" The words rang out like a heron's cry. They were full of a sudden pride that no shame could subdue.

This was his last hope. It was a challenge upon whose issue depended more than life. The

laws of caste were above royal caprice. They were the hall-mark of fate, the destiny of the gods.

The king stood aghast in speechless wrath, as if a thunder-bolt from the blue had fallen upon him.

"Prove it, thou presumptuous dog! Prove thy Kshattric blood!"

"That is my prayer."

The young man paused awhile to give time for the shot to rankle. The king himself had cried for proof. His word was passed. Proof he would have.

"Put me to the ordeal," spoke the youth, arising from his knees and standing face to face; "it is a Rajput's right. If I die, I have lied. If I escape unscathed, I am innocent of thy charge. And may *Parameshwar*[1] decide between me and my king."

"So be it. Not once, but six times, shalt thou face death and taste of its agony. Thy blood

[1] God of the Universe. Under this title the Hindus really profess but one Supreme Being.

be upon thy head. Upon the Tower of Victory shalt thou meet thy fate. I have spoken."

"And my reward, if not once, but six times, I am victor over death?" It was a bold bid that only a doomed man would have dared to make.

"Thy Kshattric blood will find its own reward," answered the king, with a smile of unfathomable bitterness, as he went into the palace.

Was this a tantalising hope to dangle before his glazing eyes as he lay gasping out his last breath? Did the king mean these words? He clutched at the hope with a frantic grasp——

But the guards fell upon him, and binding him with many chains, carried him within the palace walls. Yet, when passing a dark corridor, a small treble voice called out after them—no man knew from where:

"Fear not! Wait—watch—hope!"

That night, as they sat by the palace gate, one guard asked of another:

"Brother, whose voice was that?"

"A boy's, surely," answered the other, knowing nothing of the prisoner's crime.

"Pardon, good sirs, it was a woman's!" whispered a man as he passed by the gate.

They looked at him keenly. His head was shaven, but for a tuft at the crown. His naked breast and arms were scarred with self-inflicted wounds, and upon his forehead was painted in vermilion the broad trident of Vishnu. Perchance he had heard from the other guards the tale of the king's wrath.

They recognised him. Seventeen years before had he suddenly come amongst them—the same year that Hira Lal, of Benares, had entered the king's service. No man knew who he was, who his father, or his father's father. They called him Rama Krishna, for he was a devotee of Vishnu that was incarnated as Krishna and Rama.

He was wont to mingle with the poor and outcast, and eat of a beggar's gift. Yet sometimes in the midst of a half-spoken word they had noted the voice of a man born to command,

and in his eye had seen the piercing gaze before which the greatest in the land had quailed with fear. But now he was the devotee, the teacher of the people.

He held a withered forefinger to his overhanging eyebrow, and smiled grimly at the two.

"They are all alike, good sirs. Women ever preferred a handsome face to a wise head. This one will surely be heard again."

Then before they could ask him to unravel his mysterious words, he vanished into the dark.

"A pundit and a philosopher," spoke the first guard. "We may see him yet at the ordeal."

"Ay—unto the sixth!" answered back a deep guttural voice from the darkness of night.

Within curtained walls there was the sound of weeping and wailing by night, and the silence of the grave by day. From within palace walls

all peace was fled, all joy, all happiness. Deep sorrow reigned in the heart of the king—the heart of the father. For seventeen years had he loved and cherished this child of his latter days; had concentrated upon her the last frenzy of an old and barren and widowed heart. For seventeen years had he dreamt of the coming of a prince worthy to mate with his daughter and perpetuate his ancient race; a prince that was destined to become a king among kings, a hero among a galaxy of heroes. . . . And instead he had found his daughter's heart given to a menial at his door—for verily he could not be a prince—to one that seemed to him to have violated every law of gratitude and of loyalty, of sanctuary itself, to gain her heart.

The soul of the king was steeped in the waters of bitterness. The heart of the father was bereft of its only love.

And within the inner palace the soul of the princess was pining with love—with filial love that had been to her a lifelong heritage and a moral law; was pining with unrequited love,

because the answering love was now denied her by her father.

But the heart of the maiden, as woman, not as princess—with all the passion of womanhood, its yearnings, its subtlest joys—was all aglow with another love, a new-born love; a love greater far than filial love.

She too had dreamt dreams. For three long years since the dawn of her womanhood—the years that had seemed to her the sweetest part of her life—she too had rocked herself to sleep each night, dreaming of a hero that would dare all things for the love of her; would imperil his life, would fight the world in arms—yea, brave the anger of the gods themselves—for the love of her. Thus in that hour her heart was full of joy. For she had found her hero at last!

Would he fulfil her promise—the promise that she had vowed within her own heart? Would he dare these things, to prove his love—or die in the strife? (Less than that she would not have; more than that was beyond human

ambition.) She doubted not he would; doubted not that if ever man could prove his love for woman, heaven and earth notwithstanding, her beloved would. And thus in her own heart she vowed to aid him, succour him, comfort him—or die with him.

She sat by the palace window at early dawn the next day. All night she had lain awake, praying for light. She felt in her inmost soul that her lover was innocent of guilt. Who he was by the right of his birth she knew not—yet felt with dumb instinct that there was something within him, something that had revealed itself outwardly in response to her love, that must needs be of royal heritage. Was he but a juggler to the world? Verily to her he was a prince. Was he not a prince? Who but a prince would have sought death when he had seen the hopelessness of his love—and death from the hand of the king himself?

Thus believing, she prayed for light; prayed to Sarasathi to illumine her path that she might walk in the way of her loves, the old love and

the new; prayed for guidance that she might keep her father's love, yet retain the greater love that was now begotten in her heart.

She sat by the window wrapt in thought. The unwonted silence of the palace grew upon her consciousness. Something had struck her heart from the first with dumb apprehension, a vague premonition of coming sorrow—then had grown to shape as the silence had continued and her hungry ears had still pined for the sound that for years past had heralded the coming of her father. Now she realised with a shock: he would not come to her!

For the first time the father had denied his face to the daughter. The conflict had indeed begun!

Suddenly the curtains at the further end parted. In mingled fear and hope she turned. Then the hope died away from her eyes. It was not her father, but the mistress of the household; she that had power over all who served the princess. A woman of dignity, for she was the wife of a warrior high in command, and the

mother of five others that had proved their valour on the field of battle.

She stood at the curtain gazing before her. Contending emotions were battling within her. She had her duty to fulfil to the king, cost what it might. Yet, for years past she had served the princess with the deepest affection. Now for the first time in her life she was bidden to guard her and—watch her; to be her gaoler!

She bowed to the princess, with hands pressed to her brow. Then standing erect, she spoke.

"Sahiba, I await thy pleasure—thy command." And there was a sudden huskiness in her voice at the old familiar phrase.

"My father!" The words were scarce uttered with the lips; rather, it was an unspoken cry that needed no utterance.

But the other shook her head sadly. "He sends his peace and greetings. He regrets that urgent affairs of State at the *dewan-i-kas* (hall of audience) require his presence this day."

This day? Too well the maiden knew how long that day would last! Should she see her father again, till—till——

"Sahiba, the garden-house is closed. But these apartments——" She hesitated. How could she convey the cruel message?

"Yes? Do not fear. My father's wish is my wish." The calm dignity of the maiden helped the matron.

"These apartments are—at thy command." Which meant that henceforth the princess should be a prisoner within them!

"How long?"

"Unto the—end!" And the matron turned away her face lest perchance she should betray her trust.

"And then?"

"Thy destiny, Sahiba. What is written upon thy brow from thy birth."

Her *destiny?* What was that? For three long years had she prayed to Lakshmi to reveal to her that destiny; for three long years since the dawn of her womanhood had she prayed

the benign goddess to tell her what joy, what glory, awaited her on this earth. At her birth had she not been promised a life of perpetual happiness with her heart's beloved? . . . But instead what was in store for her? What was to be the end of all her hopes and fears? . . . Was it to be—death? Death for her love? Death for having dared to love? . . . But lo, that also would be Fate. It would, at least, be death with her loved one. (She made that vow within her heart in that moment.) Then so let it be. Mingling their hearts' blood together, they would die. What finer death could she have than that? . . .

"Sahiba, thy command!"

"This message: 'The daughter of a belted queen sends homage to her king, obedience to her father. But her inmost heart she retains for her own.' I have spoken."

Thé matron bowed. But at the curtain she paused and hesitated. A strange softness came into her eyes. Had she not herself loved in her own youth?

"Sahiba, it is my duty to place someone with thee ceaselessly—to serve thee." (She could not find it in her heart to say "to watch thee.") "But it shall be Leila; for of all the household she loves thee best. . . . And if *Parameshwar* chooses her to be the instrument of thy destiny, then I shall bow to the will of *Parameshwar*—my duty to my king notwithstanding." She added that as she departed. For there was a hidden meaning in her words that was at once full of hope and comfort; perhaps also some daring suggestion that the princess should fight her battle with such weapons as *Parameshwar* sent her.

A while after there was a flash of drapery at the parted curtain—and the swift-coming shadow reached the princess and lay prostrate at her feet. There was a strangled cry that was not spoken words. For the handmaid was but seventeen herself, and her heart was soft.

"Do not weep. Dost thou love me, Leila? Then do not weep. All things will come right; *shall* come right." As a princess she could not

mention her sorrow to her handmaid—the love that had caused that sorrow; for princesses may neither love nor speak of love. But seeing that this simple maiden had guessed her secret, and now gave her the sympathy of her tears, she accepted that homage. Likewise she accepted the offer of aid that it tacitly implied.

"And now robe me in my best." She almost said, "As for a bridal."

Then the handmaid robed her. It was a *sari* of the loveliest Dacca brocade embroidered with alternate stars and moons in gold and silver, and draped lightly with Dacca's "evening-dew"—a white transparent gauze as fine as gossamer lines.

Over the head and shoulders of the princess she placed a soft delicate shawl, fastening one end to the waist on the left side, and letting the other end hang loose over the right arm. And upon her brow she placed the "frost-flowers" of Cuttack—a star of diamonds and rubies, with forty fringes of alternate diamonds and pearls that hung down to her eyelashes. And

around her neck she placed nine rows of pearls, and around her right wrist a Rampur bracelet from which nine diverging rows of pearls radiated, to converge again upon the necklace—so that with each movement of her right arm a thousand pearls floated in the air.

"But why so early, O Heaven-born?" There was wonder in the handmaid's voice; for verily the Princess Devala had never been thus adorned till the hour of sunset. And then was it not to receive her father, the king?

"To remind me every hour that I am the daughter of a belted queen."

Then the handmaid understood. The Princess Devala drew her blood from a noble ancestress that had done battle for her lover with sword and lance—yea, astride his corpse. From that hour the Princess Devala had vowed within her heart a twofold vow: to obey her father—and yet to do battle for her lover.

That night the princess stood at her window—to think, to hope, to pray for light and guidance. Within these prison walls she must play

her part; if needs be, *prove* the blood of a belted queen within her veins.

Beneath her lay the city wall; beyond it the fields. A hundred cubits to the left, facing westward, was the Tower of Victory. Yes, upon it her lover must meet his fate! How, she knew not yet. What could the nature of the trial be? Lo, she was only a maiden, wrapped up in silks and pearls. Would that she were a man! Then indeed would she discover the secret of her father's heart and the nature of the peril that awaited her beloved—and thus perchance warn him of it. Being only a maiden, she could but pray for guidance.

Suddenly, when the stillness of night was creeping over the earth, she saw a faint glimmering light far away to the right. What omen was this? What omen of *hope?*

The light vanished. It was but a flash.

Her heart sank within her. Was it but a coinage of her brain, or rather the manifestation of some benevolent power working of her hope? . . . Thus, O Morning Star of Life

(said the Story-teller unto the Great King) doth the human heart clutch at a will-o'-the-wisp in the hour of its darkness. . . .

But the next night, at the self-same hour, she saw the light again. She *thought* she saw it. She sat still, in fear and hope.

Two hundred cubits to the right were the ruins of an ancient palace. Upon it she had seen the light. Was it the spirit of the dead that had once dwelt therein sending her a message from beyond the borderland?

And upon the third night and the fourth and the fifth she saw the self-same light.

But upon the sixth, turning her eyes to the pillar on the left, she saw the glimmer at its base. And a while after, upon its pinnacle.

With a blanched face she rose upon the morn.

"Dost thou love me, Leila? Dost thou love me more than all things?"

And for an answer the poor girl clung to her hand, bathing it in tears.

"Then go forth into the city and find the

wisest man that dwelleth there. To him put this riddle: 'Is the light human or divine?'"

And the handmaid went forth and searched the city. At eve she returned with this message written upon a palm-leaf:

"*Both human and divine. Five times upon the ruins; the sixth upon the pillar—first at its base, then upon the pinnacle. Thus five times shall there be suspense; then triumph; but triumph beginning with despair. For the base comes before the pinnacle.*—RAMA KRISHNA."

Then the Princess Devala knew that in Rama Krishna she had a friend—perchance the chosen instrument of the gods. A new light was dawning within her heart, even like unto the light that had shone without; for the one was but a symbol of the other. With new-born hope in her heart she turned to rest, awaiting the morrow. For the morrow was the day of trial. . . . She knew not that even now the hand of Fate was creeping up to her beloved!

At the third watch that night a veiled form

stole up to the guard at the palace dungeon. A mere youth, though of good birth, he was yet the captain of the palace guards. At this the critical hour of the night preceding the day of trial, he had deemed it his duty to his king to guard the dungeon in person. Twice had he opened the door at regular intervals to see that his prisoner still slept within. And now even as he had opened it for the third time, the veiled from reached his side.

She held out to him a tray upon which was a dish of delicate sweetmeats and a goblet of cool sherbet. But Harnam Das smiled grimly. Though young in years, he was old in wisdom: he knew that palace sweetmeats had power to send one to sleep.

"I have made these with my own hands. Eat and drink," she whispered softly.

And at the sound of the voice the guard started, clutching at his breath—feeling the blood surge thick through his throbbing heart. Long had he nursed a secret love in his heart, but had never dared to reveal it—to raise his

eyes to her that was the favourite maiden of the palace, the sweetest, the loveliest of them all that served the princess. . . . And now the maiden herself stood before him!

He took the tray from her, and laid it upon a tripod beside him. He lifted the goblet, and held it to her lips, saying. "Sweeten it first."

Without a word Leila raised her veil and sipped the sherbet; and after her the youth drank it down as if it were the nectar of the gods.

Then thus encouraged he brought his hand to her hand, and drew her gently to him. With a sigh she yielded herself up to him—a sigh of mingled fear and hope, of love and peace and contentment; for she returned his love. Yet must she do her duty to her mistress—nevertheless spare her lover the betrayal of *his* duty to his master.

She raised her other hand from beneath the folds of her *sari*, and coiled it round him. Then lifting her head she kissed him suddenly—thus

drowning a soft thud behind that in the ecstasy of the moment he could not hear.

The crumpled palm-leaf shot from her hand through the open door and fell upon the breast of the sleeper within. She saw him awake, gaze at the message, seize it. Then even as she saw it safe in Narayan Lal's belt, she suddenly released the enraptured guard from her embrace and glided away into the corridor beyond.

The guard awoke from his transient dream, and, suddenly conscious of his duty, turned round to the door and peered at his prisoner; but seeing him still locked in slumber, he softly closed the door—thanking the gods that he had not failed in his trust even in his dalliance with his heart's beloved.

That instant, even as he heard the bolt close upon the door, the sleeper raised his head, took out the message from his belt and held it to the glimmering light of the little oil *chirag* in the corner of his cell. Thus it ran:

"*The instrument of the gods awaits thee. In*

the hour of trial await him. *Upon the pinnacle lies death; beneath the sand life. Watch and hope.*"

And Leila, who for the love of her mistress had delivered this message at the peril of her life, fled through the corridor with a panting heart. But even as she was about to reach the inner palace (the harem) she heard a cat-like tread. Something glistened before her; vanished. In sudden terror she recoiled; found shelter behind a pillar. Long she waited, holding her breath. The footsteps had died away. Still she waited.

The silence of the night now grew around her. Then she emerged from the shelter of the pillar. The harem door lay ten cubits afar; one deep breath, and she would be behind the curtain—undetected, her mission fulfilled.

That instant a muffled form leapt out from a side passage; seized her fiercely.

"Now I have thee!" he hissed between his teeth. With bleary blood-shot eyes he peered

into hers, and bringing his thick hemp-sodden lips to her mouth, fastened them upon it like a vampire sucking the sweetness of her tender flesh.

A strangled cry, a stifled shriek—her right hand shot from her bosom. There was a flash of white, and the jewelled stiletto came straight for her captor's face—missed his eye, but pierced his ear; passed beyond, and was transfixed upon the sandal pillar.

With a muttered curse he put up his hands. In the momentary respite she slipped away from him, and fled into the harem like a frightened deer.

Binding up his ear with the end of his turban, the man stuck the stiletto in his belt. "My pretty bird, once again hast thou escaped me; but the next time I shall have my fill. Then I shall cast thee from me, and gloat over thee and thy lover—ay, over thy mistress and *her* lover in their ignoble doom."

It was the challenge of a demon to the message of hope of the instrument of the gods.

Chapter Two

ON THE TOWER OF VICTORY

KNOW, O Seat of Wisdom, that the Tower of Victory, which was to be the scene of Narayan Lal's trial, had been erected a thousand years before by a conqueror to commemorate his victory over the ancestor of the king. It was an eye-sore to him. Wither it with his breath he would if he could; pull it down bodily he dared not. For a public monument is hedged in by a tradition that has the force of religion.

No human hand could destroy it. But the will of a higher power could. The king resolved to test that will. Narayan Lal would be its medium.

Now this stone pillar, tall and narrow, was no longer vertical. An earthquake had shaken it

out of the perpendicular, till its summit, one hundred cubits (150 feet) high, leaned six cubits to one side. Since its circular base was only four cubits in diameter, this divergence should have been more than sufficient to cast down the pillar; but the unknown portion under the earth lowered the centre of gravity somewhat, and thus brought it within support.

How deep this was no one knew. Hence to what height a man might safely ascend—without his added weight, gaining in leverage each foot he climbed, just throwing the centre of gravity out of support and overcoming the leverage of the weights of earth upon the base and thereby casting down the whole pillar—was a matter of momentous speculation.

It was a fit theme for the trial.

As Narayan Lal climbed higher and higher the centre of gravity would draw inch by inch nearer the edge of the base—till that fatal line were reached. Then the tower would fall, which the king much desired. It would also kill Nara-

yan Lal, which the king equally desired. The will of the gods would be made manifest in both matters.

It was only at the moment of trial that the king publicly declared its nature. . . . But, O Seat of Wisdom (said the Story-teller unto the Great King) *to a pundit and a philosopher the nature of the trial was already known.* For had not Narayan Lal's master declared that "on the Tower of Victory" he should meet his fate? . . .

Thus a vast multitude, having heard vague rumours from the twelve guards that had witnessed the scene in the garden, gathered around the pillar; around, yet a hundred cubits afar. Men all, no women; it was anathema for a woman to see the taking of human life.

It was a surging sea of heads, quivering in a ceaseless tremor; white-turbaned, grey-turbaned, yellow-turbaned; the plougher from the fields, the lordling from his wines, the pundit from his musty scrolls. For they scarcely believed that this man would die without a gal-

lant bid for life. About his crime they knew little, and cared less. That was between him and his judge.

"It is said that he had cast eyes upon the beautiful princess," muttered a one-eyed man with a hideous leer and the signs of much opium-smoking upon his bloodless face. "But methinks more had come to pass between the two—which none would care to reveal."

His hearers scouted the base insinuation.

"Else why this royal rage to take his life?" argued the tempter.

"But this man said he was of Kshattric blood," questioned another. "Then how came he to be the reputed son of Hira Lal of Benares?"

Then a snow-bearded oracle, who had heard much but said little, gave tongue to his thoughts.

"Listen, O brothers, and I will tell you the law. It is written that no man can be a king unless he be a Kshattric, but every Kshattric need not be a king.

"Now, I have heard, or have read from the

stars, or the gods themselves have revealed it to me—it matters not which—that five-and-twenty years ago Hira Lal of Benares found a babe floating in a wicker basket on the bosom of the Ganges."

A sudden hush fell upon the throng, while each eager eye scanned the speaker's face to read this solemn portent.

"In that basket was a chaplet of pearls, a piece of sandal wood and the sacred thread of the twice-born. The thread he bestowed upon the child on the anniversary of that day, and with the sandal wood he anointed his brow. The chaplet of pearls he gave to the king on the birth of the princess—to be kept for her wedding-day."

"An omen! an omen!" whispered an awe-stricken voice. "Marvellous are the ways of *Parameshwar!* Let us see how the omen reveals itself."

The multitude turned their eyes to the pillar at whose base stood the prisoner; from him to the king sitting upon a raised daïs two hundred

cubits northward, behind which lay like a fallen giant the ruins of the old palace where once had dwelt the conqueror that had built the tower.

The young man bowed to the king, his hands crossed over his breast; yet in his eye there was a lustre that was not all shame. And a faint smile broke upon his lips as he raised his head from the ground. Then, as the guards released him and walked away on either side, he sprang to the first balcony and swung himself to it with his long, lithe arms.

Every seven feet was a circular balcony that could be entered by the narrow winding staircase within the tower. But the prisoner must climb from tier to tier from the outside—with his bare hands. He must be in sight till he reached the last tier. If he did that, and returned safe to earth, his first trial would be over.

And now he stood upon the first balcony, and bowed anew to the king. A sudden silence fell upon the vast multitude as it dawned upon

them that indeed the trial had begun. They realised for the first time that a man's life was literally hanging by a thread.

It was scarce an hour before sunset, and the pillar stood out in bold relief against the heavens. It leaned to the westward, so that in falling it might have blotted out the sun. The man's white tunic and white turban shone in the reflected glory of the levelled rays that bathed him in a celestial halo. His whole countenance was transformed in the mystic light. He stood there dominating the populace. He seemed less a doomed convict than a prophet and a judge.

A dim consciousness awoke in the multitude that this man had the aid of a power given to no man in their generation. They remembered the fame of Hira Lal of Bernares, his reputed father, and felt that his mantle had indeed fallen upon this young man who had been sent down the Ganges, no man knew whence. But all men knew that the Ganges flowed from heaven itself.

This was, indeed, the hour of his triumph.

So the multitude felt, and would have been cruelly grieved to see him fail and die. That would have seemed the failure of omnipotence itself.

"Brothers!" whispered a man with a catch in his breath, "last night I was returning late to town—even as the guards were closing the gate. Near the tower a strange fear had crept over me; it was silent desolation everywhere. Suddenly, as I drew abreast of the tower, I heard a deep rumbling sound—in the very bowels of the earth. Sounded to me like the mutterings of the dead! I fled to the city-gate, pursued by a thousand terrors."

"A manifestation!" It was a low deep murmur that broke from the throng. For there were some there that had heard of a wondrous legend: that when that tower was built there was a deep cavern beneath its foundations; and that its builder, who lived in the ancient palace on the north, was wont to immure in that cavern those members of his own family whom he suspected of aiming at the throne. Verily, it was

the spirit of the dead manifesting itself as a warning unto all men!

Thus with mingled fear and wonder they watched the youth as he climbed up higher and higher. They saw him pause at each tier, and bow anew to the king. But he was silent and never a sound escaped his lips. Those near enough, or blest with keen vision, vowed that they saw him smile as he bowed; but they also vowed that the smile was as that of a bridegroom going to meet his bride.

And the king was also silent. Between the two a conflict seemed to rage that the multitude could not shape into utterance, yet felt with dumb instinct.

Struck by some sudden inspiration Narayan Lal made the circuit of a balcony. He stopped at the east and bowed to the people there; he stopped at the south and bowed to the people there. He came to the west and bowed to the setting sun.

The sun leapt from a fleeing cloud and smiled upon him. So they will aver to this day, and

tell it to their children, and children's children, for an ancient prophecy.

But when seventy cubits from the ground, he was seen to stand upright upon the balustrade and balance himself with distended arms. And he faced the king where he sat upon his throne.

"Ho, brother! see what comes out of his mouth!" exclaimed a spectator on the north.

"It is like a cobweb, and he like a spider," answered another.

For it was a thin ethereal line issuing from his mouth, white against the blue transparent sky. It was so slender that it seemed more like the gossamer lines that float in the mind's eye, than a material, tangible substance. It was there a moment; gone the next; back again the third. It was here, there—everywhere—nowhere.

"It is a thread, a silken thread. It points to the king," exclaimed a third, shading his eyes for a longer vision.

It had grown thicker. It seemed real enough now. It floated in the air in a graceful curve

that lengthened every instant, the end sailing northwards towards the king.

Yet there was no breeze. Not a leaf stirred in the stillness of the air.

"No, brothers, it is not a thread. It is a cord!"

Truly, it was as thick as a cord. A moment ago it had been a thread; one rubbed one's eyes to look again—and found it a cord.

"It is not white. It is a dark grey."

True also; the white gossamer had grown into a grey cord. And now it reached full half the distance that lay between the tower and the daïs.

"But see, it is not from his mouth. It is from his right hand."

"From his left!"

"No, around his turban!"

But before they could decide from where, Narayan Lal had begun to climb again. He was now seven tiers from the top—six—five——

"See that!" cried out a man, reeling upon his neighbour as if he felt the earth shake beneath his feet.

" HE WAS SEEN TO STAND . . . . AND BALANCE HIMSELF WITH DISTENDED ARMS "

"What? Where?"

But the look of sudden horror that came to the speaker's eyes answered the words.

The pillar was gently swaying in the air, the slender top writing its last message upon the heavens.

It might have been a passing cloud above that gave the sense of motion. But no cloud returns the way it came. And the pillar-top was retracing its lines against the sky.

The multitude forgot to breathe. Strong men clutched at their hearts, and shook in their nether limbs. A moan here, a deep gurgle there —and some fell senseless in their brethren's arms. Others stood like dazed children, and saw visions. All were hushed in speechless horror.

"Come down! Come down!" a piercing cry broke the stillness.

"Come down!" shrieked a hundred trembling men.

"Come down!" a cry of ten thousand stricken hearts rent the sky.

With his hands upon the third tier, Narayan

Lal was seen to waver. He cast his eyes upon the distant throne to know his fate. But a rigid relentless form sat upon it. No softness was in his eyes, no smile upon his lips. No signal of mercy in his arms.

"No! Higher—yet higher! Beloved, thy task is not yet over. Higher—higher!"

It was a shriek, but a shriek of frenzied triumph full of endless hope and infinite faith that no fear could quench. Faint, and yet distinct; near, and yet afar. Standing with their backs to the royal palace, it seemed to the multitude to come from the clouds above.

At the palace window, just beneath the topmost turret of the citadel, a small purple veil lined with diamonds and pearls floated in the air in the levelled rays of the setting sun. Unseen by the multitude that had eyes only for that tragic form upon the tower, it hung against the window-sill—a silent message of love, of sympathy, of encouragement. A beacon-light to guide him to his destiny.

Narayan Lal saw it—and with a panting

heart nerved himself for the last ascent. If die he must, he would die with his beloved's eyes upon him. If rather he was destined to conquer death, she would witness his triumph.

The multitude caught at the hope. One small feeble voice, strengthened by some surging emotion to be heard so clear, had come to their rescue. A while ago they had inwardly sworn their faith in this man's destiny. Now they were saved from its betrayal by one small feeble voice.

"Higher, Narayan Lal!"

"Unto the summit, O Man of Fate!"

In a moment the fickle multitude had forgotten their own perfidy. They now shouted to Narayan Lal to fetch them the stars from the heavens.

In their new-born enthusiasm they recked not that the pillar now shook in a larger curve. All else was forgotten but that toiling form so near its triumph—or death.

"Look again, brothers!" gasped a voice. "It is not a cord. It is a rope!"

"It has grown thicker. It comes nearer the king!"

"I see nothing," muttered another. "You dream, my friends."

They took sides, that vacillating crowd. Some swore by their fathers' beards that it was a rope —that it hung over the king's daïs, ten cubits above. The end, they confessed, they could not distinguish. It seemed lost in a kind of haze or mist.

Others stoutly denied that there was anything. It might, perchance, be a line of cloud or smoke far up in the air that they mistook for a rope so near.

All eyes were turned towards the end of the rope—real or imaginary. They felt a vague, indefinable sensation, as nevrous people do before a thunderstorm. There seemed to be something in the air, heavy and unbreathable; something that deadened the brain and weakened the power of volition; some subtle emanation from a presence other than their own.

"Where is *he?*" It was a sudden cry from

someone that chanced to turn his eyes towards the pillars.

When we witness a balloon ascending the sky we see it last like a black spot hanging from the vault of heaven. It rises higher, and the black spot becomes a speck. Then we rub our eyes, and we guess where we last saw it. We aver it is still there; some of us swear they still see it. The next instant even they are doubtful if it be not a mere remembrance of the retina.

Narayan Lal had disappeared from their ken like such a speck. The last three tiers of the tower were now wrapped in a mist—real or imaginary, none could tell.

Suddenly the mist seemed to clear at the summit; the pointed pinnacle appeared in sight.

"Back! Back, all! The tower falls!" yelled a thousand maddened men.

The pinnacle swept in a rush to the west. . . . But it swung back again to the east.

"*Shabash*, Narayan!" a brazen throat shouted to the heavens. "He has reached the top! See him—see him!"

The frenzied multitude took up the cry. Some danced, some raved! some fell fainting to the ground.

A shapeless bundle of white emerged for an instant above the mist. It might have been a turbaned head—or only a ball of cloud. It swung with the pinnacle.

To the east the pinnacle rushed . . . not so far as it should have gone . . . reared back suddenly to the zenith. . . . Plunged to the west like a mad horse leaping into a yawning chasm. Hung a moment at the limit of its last sweep—passed it. . . .

The gigantic column cut through the roof of the sky . . . caught up the sinking sun . . . eclipsed it. . . .

A fearful blow smote the earth, and rocked its crest like a shell upon the bosom of the deep. The falling tower bounded anew from the shock, then lay prone like some huge leviathan killed by a mortal thrust.

A cloud of fine dust arose on either side, and spread in a screen around the sun. As if at the

touch of a magic wand the fiery orb shot out its rays in bands of red and orange and purple. It was a radiant god embracing the earth in ten thousand arms.

A human groan gave utterance to the pent-up fear.

"Merciful *Bhugwan*—he is dead! Crushed beneath the tower!"

The human sea swayed purposeless a moment, then plunged in a frantic rush towards the head of the column. Suddenly they were checked by a shout.

"The King! The King!"

Circling round, they swept in a whirlwind to the daïs.

Tall, towering, pale and emaciated, that aged figure stood erect in silence. His eyes glistened with an unearthly light—the light that men sometimes see in dark places. His breast heaved with some unseen emotion that struggled within and refused to be stifled.

Twice he raised his right hand, and twice he flung it down by his side, muttering unheard

words between his lips. The third time the hand seemed held aloft by some unknown power —the left followed it—the two descended together, slowly, gently, till they met before him, palms downwards.

A white-clad form was seen to bend before him. It knelt at his feet, caught up the outstretched hands in its own, and pressed them to its lips.

"Behold the face of thy slave, O King! The will of *Parameshwar* is done!"

Then the people around saw his uplifted face in the last rays of the setting sun.

It was Narayan Lal. . . .

As men walking in their sleep the multitude dispersed.

"But whence came he there?" asked one of another. They were the two guards that sat at the palace gate on the night of Narayan Lal's crime.

"He must have come down the tower by the steps inside," answered the other.

"Then how fell the tower—if he came down

before it fell?" persisted the questioner. "Methinks he came down by the rope."

"The rope—the rope!" cried out the bystanders.

But there was no rope to be seen now.

"There never was any rope," swore a thoughtless one.

"Pardon, friends, there was—in your minds. You were all like sleeping children, seeing ropes and hearing harps in the air. You were dreaming dreams, my friends. If there was no rope, there was no tower, no king, no Narayan Lal. You saw them all, yet saw nothing. Leastwise, there was the tower, and there was Narayan Lal; and you dreamt many things besides. Go home, good people, and pray the gods to give you understanding."

The figure vanished in the crowd. They recognised the broad trident of Vishnu on his brow, and the scars of self-inflicted wounds. It was Rama Krishna, the pundit.

But at the midnight hour a group of men were gathered together in a den at the ouskirts of

the town. They were *ganja* (hemp) smokers, and the lowest idlers of the bazaar—save one. He, in his sober moments, might have seemed to be a man of higher rank, with power in his eyes and pride in his gait. But sodden with hemp, he was just one of them: his bloodshot eyes blinking in the glimmering light, his sensuous lips drooping downwards in impotent rage at some secret discomfiture, his turban tilted slantingly over his head—so that one side of it hung heavy over his ear.

When the fumes of the drug had heightened their fancy and loosened their tongues, the hemp-smokers unfolded a drunken tale.

"Brothers," said one, gazing into the curling smoke above his head even as one gazes into the ink pool to find out hidden things, "that Rama Krishna is no pundit, but a magician. Three nights ago when I was returning to town, I saw the glimmering light upon the ruins of the old palace. No living man would have ventured to approach the spirits in their manifestation.

"But Rama Krishna so dared. For, standing still beneath a tree in much fear, I saw the light die away, and a while after I heard footsteps —coming straight from the ruins! This man passed me by. It was Rama Krishna!"

A sneering laugh answered him. "No magician, but a conspirator! It was no spirit, but Rama Krishna himself that made the light—with a lantern. He was there for his own traitorous purpose; and he showed the light to scare away all prying men."

They turned on the speaker. They knew him to have been once a scribe in the bazaar and to have read many books.

"How dost thou know?"

"Have ye never heard of the chronicles," went on the scribe, "which say that there was a subterraneous tunnel between the old palace and the cavern beneath the tower—along which the conqueror who built the tower would carry away his victims and immure them in the cavern? Indeed, many centuries ago when the old palace was destroyed in a siege, the entrance to the

gallery was covered up by the ruins, and its very existence forgotten by the people.

"But Rama Krishna, being a man of learning," continued the scribe with some pride in his own knowledge, "had read the chronicles, and knew about the buried tunnel. For some secret motive he has the cause of Narayan Lal at heart; perchance his own past history is in some mysterious manner connected with that of the youth; how, I may yet learn.

"Thus, as soon as he heard from the guards of the king's resolve to try the youth upon the Tower of Victory, he understood the nature of the ordeal. In the time intervening between the king's resolve and the actual trial, he had secretly visited the ruins by night, dug up the entrance to the gallery, and entered the vault. There he had prepared a communication between the roof of the vault and the foot of the staircase in the tower; and, placing a board over the opening, he had carefully covered it over with loose sand.

"The rest was simple enough. When near

the very top of the tower, Narayan Lal seemed to have disappeared from the spectators' gaze in one of those sudden mists that often form at the hour of sunset; he had really entered the staircase inside. Meanwhile his friend beneath had boldly opened out the communication to the vault. To reach it was the work of a minute.

"The foundations, already sunken by the leaning of the tower, had been further undermined by Narayan Lal's friend. And whilst the multitude gaped at the haze over the pinnacle, mistaking a ball of cloud for a turbaned head, the two men beneath worked frantically with crowbars and levers. As the tower bent to the west, they ran into the gallery northwards for shelter; as it groaned to the east, they ran out and overthrew a few more stones.

"Thus the oscillations grew wider and wider. When at last the tower came crashing upon the earth, they fled into the tunnel, and escaped to the ruins of the old palace at the back of the king's daïs. And whilst yet the multitude were intent upon the affairs in front, they emerged

from the ruins and mingled with the throng. Thus fell the tower, my brothers."

"But how dost thou know?" they asked him again, believing naught of what he had said.

For an answer the scribe brought out from his bosom a crumpled palm-leaf upon which were written these strange words:

"*The instrument of the gods awaits thee. In the hour of trial await* him. *Upon the pinnacle lies death; beneath the sand life. Watch and hope.*"

"I visited the vault this night, and found the message there. As the two men worked in frenzied haste at the foundations of the tower, this fell out from one of them—which, I cannot tell."

But they eyed him in open suspicion. "Thou art a scribe—and couldst have written it thyself!" Then the scribe put his lips to the hookah, and held his peace—till one by one they left him.

But one remained—he that wore his turban over his ear. "Brother, *I* believe thee," he

whispered into his ear. "And in proof shall buy the message of thee with this gold."

And going out forthwith, he straightened out the palm-leaf and read it anew. Then he took out a jewelled stiletto from under his cloak, wrapped the leaf around it, and placed the two in his girdle.

"One more chain have I around thee, my pretty bird," he muttered between his teeth. "Thou shalt yet meet thy doom. Dost thou serve thy mistress and her lover? Then their fate shall be thine—after I have feasted myself on thee! . . . Curse *him!* For seventeen years have I watched him, not realising that the cub knew of the father that had begotten him; else I had struck him down a dozen times. Now the cub is full-grown—and claims to be the lion's whelp! . . . But five more trials has he. If he escapes the gods that rule his destiny, he shall not the demons!"

For, if in Rama Krishna Narayan Lal had a hidden friend, in this man he had a secret enemy —a relentless foe who sought the life of the

youth since the moment he had so daringly put forth his claim to royal birth. If he escaped his master's wrath and passed triumphant through the perilous ordeals, he was yet in danger from this hidden foe—this assassin's dagger or his poison cup.

. . . . .

"But tell me," the Great King asked of Story-teller, "how thinkest *thou* Narayan Lal escaped the peril of the tower?"

The Story-teller bowed his head to the ground.

"By the will of *Parameshwar*, O Light of the Universe!" he murmured.

And I, the faithful chronicler of the Great King listening from the other side of the couch, can bear testimony to the truth of the Story-teller's words, O best beloved readers. It was indeed some supernatural agency that enabled Narayan to escape this peril. Perhaps he was given some occult power by which he altered the vision of the multitude—making them magnify into a rope a slender thread that he had sent out from his mouth; and, as Rama Krishna said,

the multitude *imagined* many things besides. Do you not know, O best beloved, that a marvellous wonder-worker like Narayan has power to make us see and hear and feel—without eyes, without ears, without senses—in our minds alone? Have you not heard of the other great wonder-worker who cast up a rope in the air? The rope went up unwinding its coils till it suddenly came to a stop with a jerk, its end lost in a kind of mist! Then the juggler's son, a small boy, climbed up the rope, till he too vanished in the mist! But the juggler repeatedly tugged at the rope, muttering mystic words; and the boy's arm came down, the other arm, the legs, the headless trunk, the head itself encircled with the end of the rope. Then the juggler put the pieces together, and the boy came back to life!

And, O best beloved, if you have not heard of this marvel, perhaps you have of the one placed on record in a State paper by a Chief of the Company Bahadur.[1] This great man saw a

[1] Lord Cornwallis, Governor-General of British India under the East India Company.

juggler cast up a chain in the air, and an elephant climb up by it lost from sight! Thus in like manner, O beloved, could Narayan Lal deceive the vision of the spectators.

But lest you ask me: why did not Narayan Lal flee and escape altogether, instead of presenting himself to his master and thus courting further perils? I say unto you, O best beloved, that thereby Narayan would have proclaimed his guilt beyond a doubt—and sealed the fate of the princess. The princess was upon her trial, no less than Narayan Lal. Thus he submitted himself to a new ordeal far more perilous than this, O best beloved.

"Tell it to me," commanded the Great King.

"With my lips, O Delight of the World," replied the Story-teller.

And thus he continued:

Chapter Three

THE WELL OF TEN THOUSAND SIGHS

KNOW, O Son of the Morning Star, that the Well of Ten Thousand Sighs had been dry since the days when thy fourteenth ancestor was yet in the bosom of Brahma. So also was it dry at the time of Narayan Lal's second trial. It was a large excavation near the edge of the jungle, twenty cubits in depth, and five in diameter. The wall inside was lined with solid stones, and the bed covered with a layer of dried leaves.

There was a legend that once two men were in love with the some woman; the rejected one caught the other unfairly, killed him, and threw his body into the dry well.

The woman came to the well and wept many tears over it for nine days. Then the gods, pleased with her devotion, worked a miracle.

On the evening of the ninth day a cry was heard from the bottom of the well, as from a man suddenly awakened from sleep.

The dead one had come back to life! The tears of the woman had fallen upon his wounds and healed them; her many sighs had breathed new life into his body. That was the legend; hence the name of the well. There are many such legends in the land.

The multitude came to the well bubbling with expectation. That Narayan Lal should fail at the second trial they deemed impossible; and yet its exact nature they could not guess. The king kept his secret till the last moment; he intended to fit the ordeal to the traditions of the well. The only clue to his design lay, literally, upon the mouth of the well. A solid roof of stone now covered it over—all but a small space at the centre, two cubits square. A rope-ladder was visible over the opening, the end fastened to a post at the side of the well. A group of masons stood by, with trowels in hand and stones and mortar at their feet.

"Narayan Lal," spoke the king from a raised daïs before the well, "thou didst last face death in the air above. My judgment is, thou shalt face death again in the bowels of the earth."

A low murmur broke from the gathering crowd, but whether of approbation or the reverse the actors in the drama knew not. But a sudden groan from the background revealed the presence of someone there who realised the fearful import of these words.

"Thou shalt descend into this well, as thou art now—without food, without appliances of any kind. The mouth of the well shall be covered up, so that not a particle of air may get in or come out."

He paused awhile to note the effect of his words.

How long? how long? That was the one cry in every throat that struggled to give utterance, yet dared not.

"For nine days shalt thou be within," calmly concluded the king. "On the evening of the ninth day the well shall be opened, and what

remains of thee shall be brought to light again. I have spoken."

Narayan Lal gasped for breath at these cruel words—as if already he beat the poisoned air with his impotent hands, twenty cubits beneath the earth. Already he tore with his fingers at the solid walls in frenzied madness; already he felt his swollen veins bursting from his throbbing temples; already——

So thought the stupefied multitude. Narayan Lal himself wasted no time in vain regrets. He had but a few minutes to decide upon his method of escape—if any.

Even when he had determined upon it—one appalling in daring, of fearful peril in execution—he did not feel confident of ultimate success. No man but his reputed father had tried that method and had not succumbed; even he but once in his life.

Narayan Lal would do likewise now—in that lay his only hope. He had learnt all that his great master could teach him; but this matter was not one of mere teaching. It was primarily

dependent upon the personal fitness of the human subject himself.

He prayed the gods to grant him this fitness. On the one hand was certain death, an agonising death. On the other an equally certain death, if the method failed; a bare chance of escape, if it succeeded. He resolved to accept that chance.

"Thy words, O Heaven-born, are the words of wisdom. Let it be as thou hast commanded. But I beg a single favour."

He hesitated a moment before naming it. If his real purpose were betrayed, there was no hope for him.

"In the temple of Kali there is a band of holy men; ascetics, *saunyasis*, and *byragis*. I am a novice in their brotherhood—to my shame unavowedly as yet."

There was a cry of wonder from the multitude around. The *saunyasis* and *byragis* belonged to the severest religious order. They were reputed to possess preternatural powers that were given to no fleshly men.

"It is a rule of the order," he continued in a slow and measured tone, as if feeling his way doubtingly, "that when one of the brethren, even if only a novice, is about to die, the rest must come to minister to his last wants—if they be so permitted. I beg that they now be asked to come to minister to me."

Then noting the look of incredulity upon the king's face, he hastily added:

"If thou dost fear any trickery, let me go down to the well first; then let five of the brethren come and follow me. There let them attend to my wants for such length of time as thou dost allow. They will come up again one by one before thee, leaving me beneath—or what remains of me."

This he seemed to add as an after-thought. Perhaps it meant more than anyone there suspected.

"Then seal up the well, and leave me to my fate. That is my prayer."

There was a ring of finality, of resignation, of renunciation, in the last words that some-

how conveyed to his hearers that he deemed this no simple ordeal—that he knew his fate to lie upon the knees of the gods. If needs be, he was preparing to meet his doom.

The king waved his hand in assent. The last prayer of a dying man could not be unheeded, even by a king. And the religious ordinances of India are above royal whims.

A hot-footed messenger hastened to the city at hand, to bring the brethren from the temple of Kali.

Narayan Lal stood motionless awhile by the wellside, with hands crossed over his breast. His lips moved swiftly in words that no man heard; yet all vaguely guessed that they were at once a passionate appeal and a last farewell.

Then lifting his hands aloft, he swept them across the horizon in a universal embrace—and springing to the ladder, quickly vanished from sight. A groan of apprehension burst from the populace—of pity, of censure, of rebellion. A cloud of despair hung over the scene like a black pall.

The clang of metal broke the spell. A tall gaunt figure emerged from the crowd. His whitened beard swept from his naked breast, his matted locks hung down to his shoulders, unkempt, unwashed. A saffron-dyed loin cloth was all he wore. A brasier of incense burned with a bluish flame in his left hand, a pair of tongs clanked in his right.

He was the *guru*, the high priest, of the *saunyasis*.

Behind him came four others, all alike in garb and mien. Even their passionless faces betokened the same rigid discipline that had destroyed all self and individuality in each, and the same subtle internal force that worked in each to subdue the body.

The high priest bowed to the king silently. Swiftly, silently, he went down the well. His brethren followed; silent spectres all, encircled in the pale smoke that hung in the air like a fantastic will-o'-the-wisp.

"*Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram!*" A faint monotone was heard from the well. A

cloud of incense floated up to its mouth. Some strange ritual was being enacted beneath.

"*Om! Om! Om!*" It was a deep guttural voice that suddenly burst forth in a fury of fanaticism—louder, louder, louder.

"*Praise to thee, O Bhugwati!*
Divine Chamanda, dwelling among graves,
Bearing a skull, borne on a car,
Drawn by spirits, O Mother of black nights!"

A vague indefinable thrill swept over the hearts of the multitude. They remembered the power of Kali, the dread goddess who ruled the last destiny of man with absolute sway so that other deities stood back impotent. And these were her favoured votaries calling upon her in supplication, in exultation, in ecstasy.

"*Be propitious! Be propitious!*
Quickly accomplish our desires.
By thy necklace of beads and its serpent brood
Quit this mortal clay, O Mother of Death!
Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram!"

A chorus of voices beneath took up that frenzied cry, "*Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram!*" Then suddenly all was silent as the city of the dead.

One by one returned to earth the *saunyasis*, the high priest at their head. With burning brasiers and clanking tongs they filed past the king—that he might see their faces and count their number—and left the scene.

Then the masons placed two stout boards, that together filled up the opening and a foot beyond on every side. The join of the boards they covered with shellac; and the king, coming down from his daïs, made the impress of his signet-ring over it in three places—the middle and the ends. The boards could not be lifted again without breaking the seals.

Covering the seals and the whole join of the boards with a hollow hemi-cylinder of brass, the masons quickly built up a wall over the well three cubits high. A dozen guards took up their post around it, to keep watch by turns.

"And you shall answer with your heads,"

warned the king as he rose to go, "if so much as a scratch is made upon that wall."

It was the seventh night after the entombment; a night of inky darkness, moonless, starless; for a black cloud hung over the sky. An intermittent gust of wind served but to carry the weird echoes of the neighbouring jungle.

The jungle seemed all alive at that hour. The distant baying of the grey-wolf mingled with the dismal laugh of the hyena. The faint cry of the *nilghau* floated on the breeze. Occasionally a deep ominous sound, like rolling thunder in the far distance, arose above the rest. Then all other beasts hid their heads on the bosom of the earth and were silent.

Four men sat by a fire beneath the peepul-tree that hung its furthest branch over the well. They sat cowering together, as if the air was cold and chilly—which it was not. Their lances lay in their hands, but their eyes cast fugitive glances at fitful shadows among the trees.

"Brothers!" whispered one under his breath, gazing vacantly into the impenetrable darkness, "I thought I heard—a sound—a rustle!"

The others peered beneath their brows, handling their lances nervously. For full seven breaths they waited, with heads bent low over the ground—then sighed back in relief.

"I am afraid, my brothers," spoke again the first guard; "afraid of the unseen, the unhuman, the unearthly." And he shivered in terror as his restless eyes fell upon the well.

They felt that something was happening there, of which they had no understanding; something mysterious, intangible, inexplicable. Narayan Lal must surely be dead by this time—his body denied the funeral obsequies. His soul could find no rest till then.

No rest! Floating in the air—around—above—beneath!

Suddenly a dim whiteness stood on the other side of the well; a faint, ethereal cloud seen for the fraction of a second in the reflected light.

"*Radha Kissen! Radha Kissen!*" cried out

the guards in invocation. For this was no earthly foe.

"Go in peace, O Fearful One! We are poor men, the servants of thy servant!"

But the nebulous vision had vanished from sight; sunk into the earth. Yet an answer came from the opposite side, a breaking twig, a soft footfall——

"Stand back, or I transfix thee!" cried aloud one of the guards, springing from the ground. This at least was a material foe.

But scarce the words had escaped his lips, when a tall figure stood in their midst. His head was shaven, his naked breast and arms scarred with self-inflicted wounds. He smiled gravely as he noted their gaze of terror.

"Let me sit by this fire awhile, my friends. I have walked far to-night."

It was the pundit, the philosopher. They knew his habits and his midnight vigils.

"Tell us something about *that*," they whispered with bated breath, casting furtive glances at the well.

"That is easily told." He spoke in a low husky voice that sent a thrill into their hearts. "According to the books the air in that well would begin to be poisonous in an hour; at the end of a day the man in it would lose consciousness—even as a drowning man does the third time he sinks. Then soon after he would die. Narayan Lal must long be dead now."

He filled their minds with much thought that was not there before. He spoke of disentombed spirits haunting the scenes of their earthly tragedies; of grim spectres returning to earth to finish the work they had left undone.

Suddenly a strange sound caught their ear—a sigh, a sob. It came louder, in a paroxysm of grief.

The white cloud appeared again, quivered for a moment beyond the well, then quickly vanished in the gloom.

"The Woman of the Well!" gasped someone in blank terror.

They sat cowering by the fire. They clutched at their hearts and caught their breath

for fear of arousing the vision anew. Long they waited.

Then gradually they felt the sounds of the night die away. The wind above died away, and the jungle relapsed into silence. All earth slept.

But the pundit, the philosopher, had vanished likewise. When or how, they knew not.

Then the fear of the king's command came into their hearts. Four crouching figures, holding firebrands to illumine their path, crept to the well.

"Here, O brothers, here!" whispered one, pointing to the back of the wall built over the well.

It was wet, the space of a man's hand.

"The falling dew!" exclaimed another. But the space all around was dry.

"Tears! A woman's tears!" answered a deep resonant voice from the darkness of night.

Chapter Four

THE AWAKENING OF THE DEAD

THE multitude gathered at the well on the evening of the ninth day of Narayan Lal's entombment. His master sat upon the daïs, cold and silent and austere. He sat as judge, not merely as king.

The populace may have wondered what Narayan Lal's crime could have been that he should have deserved so cruel a fate. But in the king's heart there was now one only desire: to know the truth. Doubt like a cankerworm had been eating into his vitals since that day he had discovered Narayan in the garden. The youth's obvious crime of making secret love to the princess might alone have merited instant death. But now a subtler doubt tortured the soul of the king. . . . Verily, the Princess

Devala also was upon her trial; and if Narayan Lal failed, *her* fate also was sealed!

Then like a soothing rain came to his parched heart the hope that perchance the youth was not guilty of the blacker crime: that indeed he was of Kshattric blood! The joyful revulsion of feeling begotten by that possibility surged through his heart. He who would have slain the youth with his own hand that fatal day now prayed the gods to prove his innocence. Ever and anon he looked at the sun hanging over the tree-tops; it seemed to hang there for ever, and never to sink.

Yet he waited the full allotted time; for the verdict of the gods must be made manifest though the heavens should fall. He almost held his breath as the last ray of the sun quivered over the jungle. Not till it had vanished from sight did he raise his hand for the appointed signal.

Swiftly the masons fell upon the wall. Stone after stone was loosened on every side and cast to earth, till the boards appeared.

With a strange calmness that belied his hastening breath, the king came down from the daïs.

The seals were unbroken.

With a vague indefinable emotion—half joy, half fear—he resumed his seat; joy that the youth was there to meet his trial, fear that the judgment should pronounce his guilt. The boards were raised and flung aside.

A dim white vapour issued from the opened well and mingled with the air.

A stifled groan was heard from someone in the crowd.

"His spirit!"

The multitude shivered in sudden fright. In that supreme moment of suspense it swayed at the mercy of each passing thought.

"The smoke from the incense," explained a sage from the background.

But the masons quickly lowered a rope-ladder into the well. Four strong men descended, the strongest first. As the last head disappeared the populace ceased to breathe. Each counted

his throbbing pulse for the twentieth time—then felt it die away in a spasm.

A sudden cry arose from the bottom of the well like a distant echo, a mere inarticulate gurgle.

"He is not there! He has escaped!" called aloud a voice from the throng.

But again the cry arose from the well.

"Throw down a blanket and a cord."

Five minutes after, the tightening ladder told the world that they were ascending. Perchance the post outside, to which it was fastened, groaned more with some added weight. Perchance that was but the fancy begotten of doubt and fear. But they were long in coming, and seemed never to come.

The first man appeared, bending down; the second. A long bundle came, pushed up from beneath by the others.

The bundle they silently laid at the feet of the king. But none dared to open it. It was rigid and inert.

"Open it!" bade the king in a husky whisper.

Slowly they unrolled the blanket.

As a sullen sea that stands suspended a moment, then hisses to foam over the breakers, the human throng relaxed from its tension with a sudden gasp.

"He is dead!"

"Dead!"

Then all bowed down their heads, and none found words to speak.

Narayan Lal lay there; his eyes closed; his jaws set; his hands pressed to his body on either side, flat and distended. His limbs were cold. Yet no sign of pain was upon his face. The awful agony of suffocation was not there. The slow torture of poisoned air and bursting veins was not there. Rather, his countenance was calm and serene, as of one in a peaceful sleep.

"His brethren killed him first," spoke some wise man in the crowd, "and saved him from pain."

"No, O foolish one! His brethren are here to belie thy words!" It was a deep sepulchral voice from the midst of the throng.

With clanking tongs the high priest of the temple of Kali stepped forth to the daïs and bowed to the king. His four brethren stood by him, two on either side. Five burning brasiers sent up five thin lines of blue smoke curling to the heavens.

"If he be dead, O Son of Justice, I claim his body for its proper rites. But I and my brethren will see first if he be truly dead."

The high priest bent low over the still figure. He seemed to search for some mystic sign that no man could divine. And yet he never touched the body.

Arising, he carried the body in the blanket seven cubits from the daïs, and paused a moment beside it. His left hand he stretched forth till the brasier of incense was on a level with his head; with his right he rapidly circled the tongs three times over the blue flames, his lips moving in inaudible prayer. Then with a clank he brought them down to his side, and began to walk with measured tread around the body; his brethren following.

Their lips broke forth in song, a weird monotone. Each cast a handful of incense from his girdle into the brasier. Five columns of smoke ascended the sky, curling round and round with the motion. The cloud began to thicken. A canopy of white hung over the circling men.

The shades of tropical night were falling fast, and their dim shadows moved as dark spectres against the darker landscapes. Louder and louder grew the song.

"*Om! Om! Om!*
O Thou that rulest the life of man,
Be propitious! be propitious!
Quickly accomplish our desires.
Enter here; enter, enter!
Tread, tread; dance, dance!
By thy necklace of beads and its serpent brood.
Enter this mortal clay, O Mother of Life!
Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram! Hr-r-r-ram!"

Thrice the high priest circumambulated the rigid body, thrice he waved the eddying incense

over his matted head, thrice he stopped and kissed the clammy brow.

The motion grew more rapid. From *Om* to *Hr-r-r-ram* they repeated the invocation, each time faster and faster, quickening their step with the song.

And now the cloud of incense filled the air. The canopy of white descended and shut out the body from view. Only a dim haze of moving forms could the spectators see.

Gradually the circle widened out; the space of a man's length divided the priests from the body. Yet so swift was the motion now and so thick the cloud of incense, that the body was but visible in fitful glimpses. Wilder, wilder grew the song; it was one ceaseless torrent of mingled words, or frenzied invocation. A strange sensation crept over the multitude nearest the priests—a deep oppressive feeling of something descending upon them, something invisible yet ponderable; as if they were being gradually submerged in a fluid denser than the surrounding air.

Was this but a dream? Verily, the scene before them seemed in some vague indefinable manner to have become unreal, unnatural—as if the priests and the body were no longer actual objects before their material eyes, but rather the coinage of their brains. For they felt even as the sleeper does when he is slowly awakening to consciousness and hearing the real sounds around him—and yet confusing them with the sounds of his dream. The odour of the incense filled their nostrils and mounted to their brains; the curling smoke cast a haze and obscured in outline, but magnified in size, the things they saw beyond it. Yet all was uncertain: one moment their consciousness assured them that they saw and felt and heard in very truth; the next that this was but a picture on their minds. Thus felt the multitude nearest the priests.

Suddenly the priests stood still. The brasiers they placed on the ground between their feet. With hands stretched forth, palms downwards, they pointed at Narayan Lal's body—the fingers opened wide. Ten sloping hands pointed at the

body, the arms held rigid and straight; the high priest at Narayan's head, his brethren two on either side.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the high priest raised his hands, his arms still held rigid and straight from the shoulders. Likewise his brethren. So slow was the motion that the multitude scarce knew that the hands had lifted—save that, gazing again, they saw that the slope of the arms had altered; a while ago the finger tips were level with the waist, now they were almost as high as the breast. And yet the priests' outstretched arms *still pointed at Narayan Lal's body!*

What marvel was this? A second glance, and the wondrous fact dawned upon the multitude. The youth's inert form that had lain motionless upon the ground was now suspended in the air, a cubit above the earth! Rigid as a wooden log, it hung in the air as if buoyed up in some invisible fluid—or held suspended by invisible lines of force. For, below it, above it, and all around it, the multitude could see naught but a dim

haze of incense; yet between the priests' hands and the floating body there was three cubits' space and no material connection to bridge the gulf.

The body swayed gently in the air, quivered as if wavering in doubt, held still a moment—then began to sink, slowly, scarce perceptibly; not in spasmodic jerks, but with an even and regular motion. But this the multitude saw, and marvelled: the haze of incense that had settled on the ground beneath the body whilst it was in the air now began to disperse quickly in countless wisps that licked the ground outwards all around, then shot up straight in the air—even as a gust of wind from above will cause a fire to break up into a thousand tongues of flame that will lick the ground all around, then rise up straight beyond the reach of the column of wind. . . .

And now the youth's lifeless form lay again upon the ground, motionless and still. The priests' wild weird song rose anew upon the evening air. The cloud of incense curled up-

wards from the brasiers in their uplifted hands. Swifter and swifter grew the motion as they circled round the prostrate form.

Suddenly a cry of wonder broke from the multitude above the sound of ritual.

"The *guru* has vanished!"

Four moving forms could just be counted amidst the haze.

"I see him!" cried some far-seeing, or imaginative, by-stander. "He is lying on the blanket —beside the body!"

"He is breathing over the eyes and face!" whispered another, blest with still better vision or better fancy.

The multitude around took up the contest, each seeing more than his neighbour.

"He is rubbing his hands over its face and breast——"

"*From* the face *to* the breast."

"He breathes anew upon the body."

"He is pressing down each eyeball with his thumb."

"No! He is opening the eyes!"

That instant a wild passionate cry broke from the priests.

"*Jai! Kali Jai!*"

Four burning brasiers were dashed to earth, sending up thick columns of smoke from where they fell. With a shout of concentrated frenzy, appeal, exultation, the four priests cast themselves upon the ground.

Shouting, shrieking, yelling, "*Jai! Kali Jai!*" five men arose, lifting the prostrate form to its feet. Together they hurried it forward towards the daïs—encircling it all around, so that no man saw if they carried it bodily or only helped it to move.

At the foot of the daïs the four priests fell back on either side, leaving the *guru* to support the form.

"Behold, O Mirror of Truth, the man that was dead!"

The *guru* thrust it forward face to face with the king.

For a moment the figure lay helpless in his arms—then slowly the head lifted. The right

"THE GURU THRUST IT FORWARD FACE TO FACE WITH THE KING"

hand went up mechanically to the brow and salaamed to the king. Then the head fell back to the bosom and lay still.

The *guru* released his hold, and cried aloud:

"Speak, O brother! Speak, that thou dost live!"

The head of Narayan Lal went up anew, so that the pressing throng now saw the face. It was pale and haggard and emaciated, and lined with deep furrows of a leaden hue. A thick moisture sat upon the brow and ran down the cheeks.

The face that had been a while ago calm and serene as that of a slumbering child was now, in the awakening, the face of a living corpse.

Slowly the eyes opened and dilated. Coldly, sternly, they gazed upon the king. With a sudden quiver the lips parted.

"*Jai! Kali Jai!*"

It was a small whisper, as from one speaking in sleep.

But the multitude around caught the words. A shout like the roaring of the sea went up to

the dark vault of heaven. Then a great fear came upon them all, and they were silent.

"He was not dead, O Light of Justice, but very nearly." It was the grave voice of the high priest, full of a reproach that he cared not to disguise.

"Nurse him well, ere thou dost try him again. Else the gods will think this was no appeal to their verdict, but the sport of a cruel tyrant!"

With these daring words he vanished with his brethren into the enshrouding gloom.

Hastening home from that stupendous scene, a timorous man clung to his neighbour.

"Surely, this was the work of the gods—or the devils!" he murmured, gazing fearfully into the night.

A mocking laugh behind answered him. A tall gaunt figure drew alongside and peered into his eyes.

"Thou dost see the hand of devils in this, O thoughtless one? But I tell thee that Narayan Lal slept."

"But what sleep was this that was so near death?" asked the man, with a catch in his voice.

"Hast thou never heard of men in other lands falling asleep so well that their friends, thinking them dead, have put them in wooden boxes and placed them prematurely under the earth?"

"But who put Narayan Lal in that dreadful sleep that was like unto death?"

"Himself first, and then the *guru*. His will and the *guru's* combining did this. Sleep well, my friend, and see no devils in thy sleep."

And as he turned to go they recognised him. He was the pundit, the philosopher.

. . . . .

"Truly, that man had returned from the tomb!" murmured the Great King. "But tell me, O man of wisdom, what was the greatest danger that Narayan Lal feared?"

The Story-teller kissed the fringe of the silken sheet ere he answered:

"In the awakening, O Glory of the Heavens, not in the sleeping. To put himself in *yoge* he

knew, and the high priest knew. But the knowledge of the awakening is given to but few on earth—even amongst such men!"

"But tell me, how was he raised up in the air?"

"By the power of the will, Heaven-born. The *guru's* will in union with his brethren's did this. It needed the will of all five, even as did the awakening."

But perchance you will ask me, O best beloved readers, to explain more fully this rising up of Narayan Lal's body. Hearing the tale from the other side of the royal couch, I, the faithful chronicler of the Great King, have put on record the full explanation of that wondrous scene, and now set it forth to you in such Western terms as you may understand, O best beloved. (For, were I to speak in terms of true Eastern mysticism, you would not understand me, O beloved!) This is the explanation:

From every human body there is a certain emanation; a certain force that resides in the body, and under favourable conditions can flow

out from it in a stream. This flow takes place most rapidly and powerfully from the pointed parts of the body; for instance, the finger-tips, the nose, etc.; but best from the finger-tips.

First, the proof that this emanation *does* occur: Whatever may be the *nature* of the emanation (which I shall consider presently, O best beloved) in aspect it is luminous! Though not visible to the human eye, it is yet visible to a certain wonderful recording instrument—the photographic camera. You now know that there *are* rays of light which may actually pass *through* the human body and show us all the bones within it; and yet these rays are not visible to the human eye, but only to the camera.[1]

Then know, O best beloved, that the human body itself gives out a certain luminous force, which, though not visible to the eye, is yet visible to the camera. And, O beloved, though this wondrous fact has only just been discovered

[1] The Röntgen rays.

in the West with the aid of the camera, in India it was known to sages a thousand years ago without such aid; there they knew of this human emanation by other means. But in the West its existence has only just been proved in the following manner:

A human being, placed in an absolutely dark room, can be photographed *by his own light*, provided both the camera and the person remain motionless, and the exposure be sufficiently long. Faint though it be, the impression will be quite perceptible; and it will be clearest at the points of the body—for instance, the finger-tips, if the hands of the person be outstretched during the exposure; especially if the camera be in a line with the fingers.

Why at the points? Why, you may ask, should this emanation act the best at points? Because *all* emanations, even those we already know intimately (for instance, electricity) act best at points. Lightning-rods are made pointed in order that the electricity of the earth may emanate through the point and be discharged

into the clouds, thus relieving the electric tension between the earth and the clouds.

Secondly, the nature of the human emanation: It is a form of personal magnetism. (I use this phrase, O best beloved, because it is intelligible to you. But in India it is known by a more distinctive name. Even in Western language it were possible to indicate a nearer approximation.[1]) In some persons this force or power is far greater than in others; in the *guru* it was perhaps the greatest possible in man. Even ordinary people possess it to some little extent: any four or five persons may sit round a table, place their finger-tips lightly upon it, and thus cause the table to be lifted off the ground in a few minutes. Then how much greater would be that force possessed by such men as the *guru* and his four brethren.

Now you will understand, O beloved, how it was possible for the priests of Kali—men who had made these occult sciences their lifelong

[1] Some unidentified emanation ultra to, but of the nature of, the newly-discovered Blondlot-rays.

study—to raise up Narayan Lal's body in the air. Magnetised iron, a foot above the ground, can raise up magnetised iron lying upon the ground. Then why not the *guru* in union with his four brethren the body of Narayan Lal?

Have you never taken an instant fancy to a person you have just met for the first time—or, on the other hand, instant dislike? In the first case have you not been *attracted* by that person, you could not tell why—and in the latter case *repelled?* Then know, O beloved, that in the one case it was the invisible emanation from that person which reached out to you and attracted you; in the other, repelled. Where the mutual sympathy is the greatest, the attraction is the strongest. But how great must the sympathy naturally be between the master and the disciple! Thus marvel not that the attraction also was very great between the *guru* and Narayan Lal.

But perhaps you will ask me: why was it necessary for the *guru* to test the power of this attraction before restoring the youth to con-

sciousness? Could he not have done so, without this preliminary raising up of Narayan's body? In answer I shall repeat the words of the Story-teller: "The danger to Narayan Lal lay in the awakening, not in the sleeping." Verily, not till the *guru* felt sure that Narayan's personal magnetism had returned to his body could he venture to awaken him from his long *yoge* (trance); for, during it, all the functions of his body were suspended; likewise his personal magnetism. And what greater certainty could the *guru* have of the return of that force than the response given by Narayan's body to his own? Verily, not till he saw the youth's body rise up in the air did he know for certain that his body was resuming its normal functions—that the time had indeed come to awaken the sleeper, without fear of a relapse into perpetual slumber, death! Even as it was, Narayan Lal only just escaped that peril!

Yet, manifold as was the peril, he had the help of his brethren. In his next trial the spirit of the dead must have befriended him.

Chapter Five

TONGUES OF FIRE

KNOW, O King of Kings, that the doing of a perilous deed becomes doubly perilous when the doer has no warning of his task and is denied every accessory in its accomplishment. How much more, if his fears be first lulled to sleep by a false security as to its true nature! Aye, if added to the trial there be another peril, subtle, mysterious, and unforseen alike by him who is tried and he who sets the trial! Of this unknown peril first.

Know, O King, that seventeen years before the opening of my tale—the same year in which Narayan Lal's reputed father had entered his master's service, bringing with him as a mere child the hero of this tale—also, the same year in which that mysterious pundit, Rama Krishna,

had likewise appeared on the scene—a third man had also followed in the footsteps of the two former. . But these two knew nothing of him; never suspected his presence so near them. Once indeed Narayan Lal's reputed father, Hira Lal, had caught this stranger watching the growing child with rapacious eyes; but he had deemed that to be mere vulgar curiosity, not an indication of any evil purpose. And once again, as a boy of twelve, Narayan was bathing in the Ganges and had swum out beyond his depth—when suddenly he had cried out that an alligator had caught him by the foot and was dragging him down, and Hira Lal had just been in time to rescue the boy. But looking at the boy's ankle he had found, not the marks of an alligator's teeth, but the broken end of a looped wire! Then suddenly he had remembered that a boat had been moored nigh, and had hastily quitted its moorings on the rescue of the child, and glided downstream.

Yet Hira Lal had failed to connect these two circumstances together, and suspect any evil

machination against the child. Nay, when a strange man sought to enter the service of the ruler of that land, and gradually rose high in office in the royal household—even then Hira Lal, though seeing him often, failed to recognise in him the stranger that had once cast evil eyes upon the unguarded child.

And now, O Heaven-born, when the child was grown up and on his trial before his master, that stranger had become the Jemadar of the Household. Of his joy, when he saw Narayan Lal so near death, there was no limit. Verily, if the youth were killed, his own task was at an end! Could the youth escape? Surely not! Four more trials had he; within them he must die.

Thus the jemadar had resolved to render the trials more arduous still. He had kept vigilant watch upon Leila; for he suspected her of being her mistress's instrument in aiding the youth. Also, he had hungered after her for purposes of his own; for Leila was a beautiful maiden. Of her own lover, Harnam Das, the captain of the

palace guards, the jemadar feared nothing. He would have the maiden in spite of him—then fling her away. For he still nursed his pierced ear under his turban, and kept in his girdle the jewelled stiletto that had made the wound.

But the night before Narayan Lal's next trial, the very hour he was scheming the youth's death, a call came to him from the outer world—the world he had left behind a full generation; and yet the call was in furtherance of the very purpose in his heart. He was gazing out of the window of his apartment in the outer wing of the palace, when a faint sound trickled into his ear out of the stillness. It was short and sharp. It came again, now long-drawn and more intense.

It was the hooting of an owl. The usual dismal cry of the night-bird, and yet not quite like it. There was a persistence, insistence, in the last note.

The jemadar started. Dimly, slowly, something awakened to life within him. For one brief moment he paused, wavering in doubt.

The sound reached his ear a third time—and memory came back to him like a lightning-flash.

He quitted the apartments, and stealthily made his way towards the far end of the garden, creeping along the shelter of the wall; for he deemed it unwise to seek exit by the palace-gates. Reaching the far end, he gathered together an armful of stout creepers, twisted them together into a long rope, found a tall tree whose projecting bough hung over the wall, and climbed up the trunk. Gaining the end of the bough, he tied to it the rope, and descended by it to the other side of the wall.

The owl's hoot he himself gave, once, twice, thrice. From within the shelter of a ravine a dark shadow came up to him in response. A form muffled up in a long *choga*.

"The fiery trident!" it gave the sign.

"And the axe of sacrifice!" gave back the jemadar the countersign.

The form threw off the *choga*.

"The Master sends thee this!" He held out to the jemadar the serpent-ring.

And at the sight of the serpent on the little trinket the jemadar's jaws set tight as a vice. He salaamed with both hands, bowing to the ground, saluting this little wisp of gold. For he realised its significance. He must obey its message even at the peril of his life. For though he openly served one master, he was secretly in the pay of another. A spy in this court. A Thug; an assassin.

The messenger peered into his face with narrowed eyelids.

"For seventeen years hast thou eaten in secret the Master's salt, watching the cub. Now the Master bids thee—strike!"

Thrice the jemadar kissed the serpent-ring ere he answered. "To hear is to obey. For seventeen years I have sought his life, without the peril of my own; for I deemed the cub ignorant of his birth, and thus the sacrifice of my own life unnecessary. But now tell the Master: the lion's whelp shall die—if need be at the cost of my life. In the trials he shall fall; if not, then in the very hour of his triumph!" And the

jemadar steeled his heart to the deed he had so long deferred.

"Nay, afterwards it were too late; for if he triumphs, *his* master will aid him to regain his own. Thou must strike *within* the trials."

The jemadar bowed his head. "He is too well guarded; for his life is precious to his master for the very purpose of the trials. Nevertheless, he shall not live. I have spoken!"

"It is well," the messenger answered, eyeing him narrowly. "And if thou dost want aid, five of the brethren are at thy service! Dost thou understand me?"

The jemadar understood. "It is written!" he murmured. For the five Thugs would aid him to slay his victim—or slay *him*, if he flinched in his task. They were spies upon a spy.

"They will be in the cavern beneath the great banyan tree," the messenger continued, "awaiting thy call. If thou shouldst want them at the palace, give the sign of the owl; there will be one at this wall to hear thee. If

beyond the palace, even to the mountains, then put up the sign of the flaming torch upon the plateau."

Thus in that hour the false jemadar, the Thug in disguise, vowed to take Narayan's life within the trials; otherwise his own life would be forfeited.

But that very hour, whilst the jemadar was absent from the palace, the gods in a sportive mood seized the opportunity to send their aid to his victim—and, wondrous caprice of the gods, through his other victim! Through the very woman the jemadar sought to injure!

Crossing the courtyard with her silver pitcher balanced deftly upon her head, and nearing the crystal fountain by the outer gate, Leila saw an aged mendicant begging alms from the guards. A strange presentiment entered her soul. A beggar's blessing had power to sway the will of the gods. She called the mendicant within the courtyard.

But receiving the bounty, and raising his hand to bless her, he murmured, "Upon thy

head be Lakmé's choicest gifts—and upon *his* head this!"

Something dropped from his hand into the folds of her *sari*. A small phial, no bigger than a man's thumb.

A smothered cry—and the beggar's warning hand checked the maiden; for the guards were nigh. With startled eyes she gazed into his; read therein a perilous message.

"To-night; else it were too late!"

With these whispered words the mendicant hobbled back to the gate and vanished into the dark.

Then light came to her heart, and she understood. For she realised that upon the morrow Narayan Lal's life would again be in peril. This night she must act. . . .

And upon the morrow, an hour before sunset, without previous word or notice even as to the day of the trial, Narayan Lal was taken before his master in the audience-hall of the palace. He was not permitted to bring anything with him, save the clothes he wore—white

trousers, white tunic, white turban. His feet were bare.

The king sat in his robe of state upon the ivory throne. Around the daïs sat the councillors; grey-bearded, grim-visaged warriors that vaunted their scars of many battles; clean-shaven, yellow-robed pundits that brazened their caste-marks of sandal wood upon their proud foreheads.

Behinds the guards at the doorway thronged the people, and in the courtyard beyond a vaster multitude that, seeing nothing, yet heard each murmuring word floating down the human tide.

Narayan Lal stood before the throne with arms folded over his breast. Around him was an empty space twelve cubits in diameter. That was his arena.

"Make us see and feel something that is not before us now," spoke the king from his throne. "But not all alike. Some of us to see one thing, some another, others a third, and so on; all different each time." And the king smiled

grimly as he bethought him of the trap he had laid.

In a vague glimmering light in his mind Narayan Lal seemed to discern faintly that the utmost of his professional skill was now demanded of him. To create out of nothing was difficult enough; to do so repeatedly and each time a different thing was beyond human power. And an indefinable presentiment came over him that even this was only a prelude. What potential dangers lurked beyond, he but dimly guessed.

Yet one resource was within his reach—if he did not belie his own powers. They wanted to *see* things; things not in existence. Seeing was but a mental phenomenon. See they would then; all that they desired. That at least he could try—and the gods grant him favour and prey upon the visions of these lumps of clay. . . . Would they *see* things? Verily they should see and yet not see! . . .

He tore a piece from the end of his turban, about the size of a handkerchief. From this he

tore again a thin strip, rolled it lengthways between his fingers, and coiled it round and round into the shape of a thick disc. Approaching the councillor nearest him, a heavy old warrior with huge side-whiskers twirled over his ears, he said to him:

"Open thy right hand, good sir, and take this cloth."

Narayan Lal placed the coil in the other's open palm, and pressed it down hard upon it. Next he closed the warrior's fingers over the coil, and begged him to grip it tight. Then he withdrew to the end of the space, twelve cubits away, and addressed the councillor.

"I ask thee, sir, to think with me of the things I mention. Close thine eyes. Imagine thyself to be alone in a fortress. It is midnight, dark and silent. Thou art watching by the wall, but feeling tired.

"Suddenly a faint sound is heard: something moving along the top of the wall! It comes nearer, creeping up by inches. What lurking danger can it be, so slow, so subtle? To

what proportions would it increase, if unchecked? Still creeping up, creeping up, right before thee. . . . *Put they hand on it—catch it—hard!*"

The old warrior snatched frantically at the air—but only gripped the coil tighter. His hand trembled violently. He held the wrist with the left hand to steady it; but it still shook as in an ague fit. The fingers began to be forced outwards. His eyes were now wide open—with a vacant glassy stare.

"Hold it fast!" cried out the juggler.

The warrior set his teeth and clenched his fist, till the blood stood out in the veins; but the fingers began to move up and down as if he were playing upon an invisible violin. A volcanic force seemed to be working beneath.

"A *jinn!*" gasped the old man, throwing open his swollen hand. A little brown thing wriggled out and dropped to the floor.

It was a live lizard.

With tail erect and head raised, it began to run along the floor to the foot of the daïs. But

Narayan Lal sprang forward, and caught it in his hand.

Holding it aloft by the tail, so that all could see it a moment, he tied it up in the remaining piece of cloth he had torn from his turban. With this he approached one of the guards by the side of the daïs. This man was a peasant by caste.

"Take this creature in thy hand, my friend," he bade him.

The guard shook his head dubiously; but noting his master's eye upon him, put out his hand reluctantly. Narayan Lal placed the bundle there, and requested him to hold it high above his head; then he retired to his own place, twelve cubits away.

"I ask thee, friend, to think with me of the things I mention," he repeated the formula. "Close thine eyes. Imagine that a great famine is raging in the land. Rice and wheat crops are withered by the sun. Thou art hungry; thou hast gone to bed supperless.

"Thou art dreaming. Something seems to dangle above thy pillow. It comes nearer and

nearer. Suddenly it falls within reach. . . . *Stretch forth thy hand—seize it—quick!*"

The sepoy held on to the cloth with a desperate clutch. Something hard lay in it, motionless and inert; a while ago it was a soft wriggling lizard.

"Open it, friend, and eat it!" bade the juggler, with an encouraging smile.

Like a soulless automaton the sepoy opened out the bundle. Something fell out to the floor.

It was a maize stalk a span in length, and studded with glistening corn.

"Eat it," asked again the juggler. But the sepoy would not. Maize made from lizard was not toothsome.

"Then hand it over to the venerable councillor before thee," requested Narayan Lal, still retaining his place twelve cubits away.

But the councillor was a high-caste Brahmin. He turned away his head scornfully.

"Take it, good father," Narayan Lal begged, "merely to hold in thy hand—not to eat. Perhaps the gods are about to reward thy piety."

"HOLDING IT ALOFT BY THE TAIL . . . . . HE APPROACHED ONE OF THE GUARDS"

This he added with a subtle smile that seemed to convey a hope and a promise. Long afterwards they realised that it might have equally implied a threat and a warning.

With grave curiosity as to what the gods would do for him so late in life, the Brahmin took the maize. After all, it was lifeless.

"Lay it upon thy lap," the juggler said to him, "and cover it over with the cloth.

"Now think with me of the things I mention. Close thine eyes. Imagine thyself in the temple of Sarasathi, the Goddess of Wisdom. Thou art meditating before the sanctuary on the folly of mankind and the wisdom of the elect. Gradually the merits of thy fourscore ancestors pass in review in thy mind.

"Suddenly the goddess on the altar smiles upon thee. She takes something from her bosom, something bright and glittering in many parts, and showers it down upon thee. It falls upon thy lap. . . . *Hold it, father!—both hands—lest it fall!*"

The Brahmin snatched at the cloth on his lap.

With nervous hands he raised it, fumbling at the folds. A shining coil, scintillating sparks of fire all along its length, fell out upon his knees.

"The *mohan-mala*, the garland of enchantment!" whispered the priest, with a catch in his voice.

"Verily, it is," answered the juggler. "The goddess has sent it to thee."

The Brahmin held it up to the light hesitatingly. It was a gold chain wrought in alternate flowers, lotus and champak; the crown of the jeweller's art.

"Place it around thy neck, venerable father, so that thou mayest become wiser than thy generation."

As one in a dream, scarce believing what he saw, the priest passed it over his head, whilst all around gazed upon it with hungry eyes.

"Truly, this is marvellous," murmured to him the simple-minded sepoy by his side. "Didst thou note, father, that Narayan Lal stood all the time twelve cubits away—from the passing

of the maize to thee, till the creation of the garland?"

"Wonderful!" exclaimed a more fanciful neighbour. "A chain of gold from a maize; a maize from a lizard; a lizard from a piece of cloth. Wherefore, the chain comes from the cloth——"

"To fools!"

A loud laugh was heard from somewhere, a derisive laugh; cold and hard and cynical.

At the sound of the voice a strangled cry broke from Narayan Lal's lips. Involuntarily he turned his head towards the end of the hall. Something seemed to knock at his heart. For the first time the stern and haughty calmness he had maintained so far, deserted him. He trembled like a frightened child.

But ere they could discover whence the voice had come, Narayan Lal's master intervened. . . .

Without a word, ignoring the wonder of the multitude and their applause of the juggler's skill, Narayan Lal's master motioned with his hand to the attendants by his side. One of them

withdrew for a while into the adjacent chamber, then re-appeared with a bundle wrapped up in jute sacking. He knelt down before the king, who broke with his hands the seal upon it—the seal of his own signet-ring.

The attendant opened the bundle before Narayan Lal; it contained an armful of straw. Placing it before the juggler, he withdrew.

"Breathe fire into it," bade the king, pointing to the straw.

"That is impossible!" muttered someone to his neighbour. But the latter rebuked him, saying:

"I have often seen him bring forth fire from his mouth——"

"That was when he knew beforehand what he himself intended to perform," protested the first speaker. "How can he do it forthwith, without warning or preparation!"

But the king had meant more than that. To create fire at another's command might in itself be impossible. The king demanded still more.

"Bare thy head and place the burning straw upon it," he continued. "Then prove to us that what had burnt upon thy head was a real fire." For verily this was the trap he had laid for Narayan Lal!

Mechanically, as one moving in his sleep, the juggler took off his turban, his thick glossy hair falling down to his neck. He seemed hardly to realise what was asked of him, so wrapt was he in thought. For a moment he stood there, turban in hand, gazing into vacancy. He looked towards the king, but not *at* him; rather at some bygone scene that he was vainly striving to recall to memory; something full of pleasure, yet full of pain. A pleasant recollection, mingled with deep sorrow—sorrow that it was passed for ever.

He knelt down upon the floor and mechanically drew the heap of straw towards him, and gazed into it as if it were alive and could speak—but found no answer there.

Like an automaton he handled the straw, raising it to his face, smelling it, asking it mute

words with suppliant eyes. Rather, as one whose body was there indeed, but whose mind and heart were far away.

Then with a sudden sigh he caught up a handful of straw. Pressing it an instant upon his bared head, he began to rub it briskly between his palms. Faster and faster moved his hands, straight up and down. Now and again he blew upon the straw, a long steady breath.

The spectators craned their necks to watch. A buzzing whisper went around to tell the world what he was doing—dilating upon this simple action with fanciful embellishments.

"I have seen his father do it," murmured a wizened old man, a Behari merchant by the shape of his turban. "It was at the court of Benares—before he took service here."

His hearer, with eyes still upon the juggler, screwed his mouth aside. "Thou knowest much, stranger. What more didst thou see?"

"This very youth," calmly replied the other. "He was a mere child then. His father placed fire upon his head, and it did not burn. The

king rewarded him much; so also a great traveller from over the sea, whom the king was entertaining."

The lips of the juggler began to move in inaudible words, as if he spoke to some kindred spirit hovering round. A strange lustre came into his eyes. They were not upon the straw, but straight ahead. It was an awakening gleam —as of one long asleep in darkness seeing light. The lost memory was coming back to his soul.

"Father!"

It was scarce a whisper that broke involuntarily from his lips; more like a distant echo. His blazing eyes held communion with someone that others could not see. The hands full of the straw he stretched forth to clutch the vision—then recoiled open-mouthed.

With a sigh, almost a moan, he began to rub the straw anew. But that instant there flashed forth a light of joy in his eyes—wild, frantic, ecstatic.

He raised his head higher and higher, gazing

at some approaching object. A smile quivered upon his lips as the vision paused over his head. He felt the presence of some master-mind overshadowing him, descending upon him like evening dew.

"*Mahatma*" (great spirit), gasped someone that realised the omen. But those near him—fleshly men, of the earth, earthy—knew not what he meant.

In frenzied haste Narayan Lal rubbed the straw, breathing wild gusts of wind into it. Faster and faster, to and fro, up and down, spasmodically.

Suddenly he leapt to his feet, raised his quickening hands over his head, offering a holocaust to him that hovered there, brought them down to his mouth, emptied his hot breath into the straw in one loud blast, flung up his arms, and hurled the straw to the ground.

There was an instant flash—like the setting sun reflected from the crest of a wave—a tongue of flame leaped to life from the falling straw.

"Fire!" shrieked a voice from somewhere, a shriek of mingled fear and joy.

"Living fire!" whispered they that saw—hushing their voices in sudden awe as the impending tragedy dawned upon them with a shock.

But scarcely had the flames reached the floor when Narayan Lal sprang forward, snatching up a handful from the heap at his feet, and gathered up the burning straw in his bare hands.

"Draw thy sword, quick!" he cried out to the nearest guard. "Advance—hold the naked blade over my head."

He fell on his knees and placed the burning straw upon his head.

"Hold the blade in the flames—the middle—flat!" he shrieked out like one possessed.

With one hand he kept the straw upon his head; with the other he reached out and piled on fresh lots from the bundle at his feet.

The hot cinders fell over his eyes and face, and twinkled upon his shoulders. Little black holes

began to form in his flimsy white tunic. A flaming wisp fell from his brow, glanced off his cheek, and found new life upon his breast. The red line flared up there, meandered along the collar-bone, then burnt itself out upon a braiding. And all the while Narayan Lal fed the flames upon his head. His eyes were blazing like a madman's, glistening through a thick moisture that was not tears.

A column of smoke went circling to the roof of the hall, and finding no outlet, crept along the walls. Soon a dim hazy mist began to form.

The white-clad figure kneeling upon the floor —the red tongues of fire leaping up from his head and licking the glittering steel—the dazed, stupefied sepoy standing motionless by the flames—all encircled in the wreathing smoke: What a picture!

"Let me go! Let me go!"

It was a sudden shriek, a shriek of terror and unholy fear. It came from the guard.

He was trembling in every limb, his eyes fixed

in blank horror before him, his brow and face bathed in a heavy sweat that came not from the flames, for his skin was cold and clammy.

"Let me go!" he cried again, dropping the flat of his sword upon the juggler's head. "See, the flames—the flames!"

He pointed with his other hand to the red tongues. But the tongues of fire swayed to either side of the steel, licking it hungrily. The multitude thought that he had suddenly gone mad.

"No! The breath—the breath! Can ye not see him breathe upon the flames?"

But Narayan Lal knelt motionless, like the bronze statue in the temple of the Fire-god upon which burnt the ceaseless embers. He seemed to be in a trance; his eyes were closed, his lips pursed tight. Only his hand moved mechanically to reach the straw by his side.

"Not him—but the other!" And the guard pointed his shaking hand at the top of the flames. But it was only smoke there.

"Stay there!" bade the king in a cold stern

voice. "Hold up the sword to the flames!" Having eyes, he could not see; having ears, he could not hear; neither he nor the lumps of clay around him. But the poor mad sepoy, that held the sword and saw visions, was within the flaming zone; to him the curling smoke was indeed the materialised spirit of the dead!

"But there is no flame!" muttered a stranger in the well of the hall.

They turned upon him with a savage glare. Who dared blaspheme their god-given eyes?

It was a man dressed in a black *chupkan* reaching down to his knees; upon his head there was no turban, but a long funnel-shaped hat. A Parsi; a fire-worshipper.

"It is a large red flower, the many petals waving in the wind!" persisted the man.

"Art also mad? There is no wind!"

But that instant a cry was heard from someone in front. It was the last handful that Narayan Lal was piling upon his head. He could scarcely be seen in the dense smoke, only his faint

outlines. The man before him stood like one dazed. He clutched the hilt of the sword with both hands, holding the blade horizontally before him.

The dying embers flickered, glowed, flickered again, then suddenly vanished in the smoke. A heap of ashes fell in a shower around Narayan Lal's face and shoulders.

That instant he leapt to his feet, a madman's haunted look in his eyes—snatched up the sword from the soldier's grasp—and sprang to the front of the daïs.

The middle of the blade was painted red, four fingers in width.

Twirling the sword above his head, he brought down the point upon the marble floor. There was a sharp clank—ending in a dull thud. Again he raised the sword, rapidly turning it in his hand to the other side. The blade was bent in the middle—at the zone of red.

Down it came to the floor again. A heavy thud—a loud clatter—and half the blade sprang from the blow and smote upon the foot of the

daïs. Recoiling, it lay before the juggler. His hand went forth and snatched it up.

"Behold the fire that was a real fire, O Sun of Life!"

There stood Narayan Lal bowing before the throne. In his left hand he held the pointed half of the blade; in his right was the hilt.

But the red zone had vanished from either half. A grey band marked the place in each where it had been.

A thunder of applause burst from the pent-up spectators. It was a babel of voices, shrieks, shouts, yells of frenzy.

Suddenly a single cry was heard.

"O King! I claim thy justice!"

It was the Brahmin councillor who had received the *mohan-mala* from Narayan Lal. He was now standing before his seat, his eyes blazing in wrath.

"There is a thief in this assembly!" he cried out fiercely, sweeping his thin bony finger to the world around. His rank alone entitled him to such bold words.

An instant hush fell upon them all. This was bathos indeed. A while ago they were in the clouds above; now they were hurled to earth with a rude, sordid shock. Each looked at his neighbour askance, and wondered where the blow would fall.

"The garland has been stolen from my neck."

Truly the beautiful chain of gold no longer shone upon the Brahmin's breast. With one accord all eyes turned to the man sitting behind him.

But he was a bronzed old warrior, the hero of many battles. He was chewing his bushy beard —and his right hand playing with the hilt of his sword.

"But look! look! Upon thy bosom!"

It was a startled cry from the guard that stood by the Brahmin's side. He pointed his hand at the Brahmin's breast.

A loud mocking laugh answered him from the back of the throng—cold and hard and cynical.

Dazed and bewildered, a thousand emotions rending his heart, the old priest put his hand to

his bosom. With a frantic clutch he pulled out something and held it up.

It was a long strip of cloth, rolled up lengthways; the same that Narayan Lal had torn from his turban. *All eyes saw that.*

The garland of gold had returned to cloth.

"Gold back to maize; maize to lizard; lizard to cloth!" Such was the comment of the multitude. But all the transformation they had not seen. It was merely their fanciful imagination lengthening out the final change.

"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity," murmured the priest in a quivering voice whose bitterness he could not disguise.

"Nay, venerable father, it is the wisdom of the elect. The goddess has made thee indeed wiser than thy generation."

And like a man risen from a funeral pyre whilst yet the flames were doing their work, Narayan Lal turned to his king and faced him upon his throne—begrimed, besmeared, cold and haughty and domineering.

Then for the third time on the self-same day

his master tried him anew in the very moment that Narayan Lal thought his perilous task for the day was over.

Without a word the king descended from his throne, walked to the courtyard, turned to the right and came upon the adjacent field.

But lo! what sight was this upon the field! A rectangular trough, thirty cubits long and ten wide, was dug in the ground. It was filled with burning fagots. By its broader side, towards the west, stood a hillock of the same. A crowd of sweating firemen, naked to the waist, fed the trough from the hillock, and kept it ready for their master's use; for they had received his command to keep the fire burning bright in the trough, though they knew not for what purpose. At intervals they cleared the ashes from the top with long rakes, so that the trough was one level surface of glowing charcoal.

Fifty cubits to the north was the water-tower that fed the fountains of the adjacent palace with their hundred jets. But all this day the jets had been silent, so that the water-tower was now

throbbing with pent-up force; instead, a single pipe had been inserted at the base of the tower, ending in a brass nozzle. The nozzle could be turned in a socket to point upwards, downwards, or at any angle outwards. Its purpose no man knew.

Seated upon the daïs by the side of the tower, the king spoke to his prisoner before him with a veiled sneer:

"Thou hast escaped the fire of thy own creation. Now escape mine!"

What hideous mockery was this! What brutal sport of pitiless Fate to let a man escape one deadly peril, and then forthwith to try him again with the same peril in a deadlier form!

"Thou must cross the fiery gulf, along its length, upon thy naked feet," the voice of the king spoke in relentless words. "Thine own fire did not touch thy head. See if mine will burn thy feet!" And for the first the king laughed in his bitterness.

Narayan Lal stood before him, silent and still.

"What! Dost refuse the ordeal? Dost fear

the fire? Then thou shalt perish by water." The king pointed to the brass nozzle beside the daïs.

Then all understood its purpose. If Narayan Lal refused the fiery ordeal, the guards would lay him on his back before the water-tower, and insert the nozzle downwards into his mouth. The lever controlling the mechanism would be suddenly turned, and the piled-up water let loose in all its fury through the nozzle. The next instant Narayan Lal would be dead. . . .

He bowed his head.

"What is written upon my brow shall be fulfilled, the cruelty of man notwithstanding. I accept thy ordeal, O King!"

The guards escorted him to the southern side of the burning trough, facing the king. At its edge they left him, and fell back on either side.

For one brief moment Narayan Lal paused in thought, then quickly took off his tunic; his turban he had left behind in the palace-hall. Seated upon the ground, he rolled up his trousers to his knees. Suddenly he bent low his

supple form, and reposed his head upon the ground between his feet, his long hair covering the feet on either side.

The shades of night were now falling fast. The multitude stood by the trough, twenty cubits afar, facing the hillock. From left to right Narayan Lal would cross—or perish in the fiery gulf. They watched him keenly.

At the edge of the trough his half-nude form glistened with rolling sweat. He raised his head a moment, revealing the soles of his feet. Facing the fire, they caught the heat full, and seemed to crinkle inwards. Then again Narayan Lal lowered his head upon them.

"He prays to Agni, the fire-god!" the multitude whispered with bated breath.

"——To give to his feet the immunity of his head!"

"See, he knocks his head upon his feet!"

For now with both hands laid upon his long hair Narayan Lal seemed to bow his head quickly and repeatedly upon his feet. Then suddenly he leapt up and stood erect. For that

brief instant he seemed in the lurid glare to be but a bronze statue. The sweat streamed down his body and wetted the ground beneath his feet. The next instant he plunged into the burning trough.

The first three strides he took he scarce seemed to touch the fire. Then suddenly he seemed to flounder; some treacherous spot seemed to yield beneath his tread.

"He is lost!"

"Run to the side!"

"No! Onwards!"

Ay, better to die battling with the fire and upon it, than to perish impotent by water and beneath it. It was all done with the quickness of lightning; with fire there could be no pause or hesitation. Narayan lurched forward, reeled, steadied himself, then with one deep gulp of breath bounds onwards. Did the glowing embers crackle beneath his tread he recked not; little red sparks shot up around his feet—he heeded them not. With eyes straight before him, teeth clenched tight, nos-

trils opened wide, he flew over the trough. It was one mad rush whilst yet the spectators took but three short breaths. It could not be more. Within that he must die or conquer.

He approached the other end. At ten cubits he vaguely saw something before him: at seven he realised its import. Perchance some careless fireman had failed in his task and had piled there burning wood, not glowing embers; perchance it was a sudden gust of wind; he knew not. All that he saw in that instant's flash was a million little tongues of flame shoot up before him like a million spikes.

One short step to the very edge of the spikes and he hurled himself headlong through the air—over the flaming zone. Falling to hard earth, he lay prone an instant; his feet, skimming the last row of flames in their fall, were drawn in quickly beneath him. Then staggering up, reeling forward like a drunken man, he reached the dais; cast himself down before it.

"*Dohai! dohai,* O King!" the words escaped from his bursting lips. It was that terrible

cry for justice, eternal justice, that the supremest monarch on earth must heed.

With these words Narayan Lal lay prone at his master's feet, rigid and inert and motionless. Half his task was over. He still lived.

His master bowed his head. An attendant approached with a jar, and poured a stream of cool olive oil upon Narayan's feet.

"Open the flood-gate," the king bade again.

The nearest guard tilted up the nozzle and turned the lever that controlled the piled-up water. There was a short sharp hiss; then a furious jet, an inch thick at the nozzle, shot out in the air, expanding. Sixty cubits afar it fell—upon the fiery trough. In that moment all men realised the power and the fury of the water, and inwardly shuddered, thinking of the nameless death in store for Narayan Lal had he refused the fiery ordeal. For, ere the tower was half empty, the trough was but a sluggish lake.

"Carry him away, and tend him well," the king spoke again.

And at the command the guards carried Narayan Lal away upon a *charpoy*. Laying him upon his bed, they wiped the oil from his feet.

Lo! the soles were whole and unburnt, without even a scald!

. . . . .

"Verily, the mind is greater than the body," murmured the Great King from his pillow. "Yet methinks, in piling fire upon his own head he had died in agonising torture, but for the benevolent spirit of his dead father." This he added with a sigh, as he thought of his own hundred ancestors and their sevenfold virtues.

The Story-teller was silent awhile, letting the soothing hope do its work. The Great King was sick unto death; the Great King might yet be saved by that hope.

And yet, O best beloved readers, there were found evil-minded detractors who doubted the marvellous nature of these facts. Away from the presence of the Great King, I afterwards heard from the Story-teller of their foul

calumnies. For, on the night of the trial, when the multitude had dispersed from the audience-hall, a band of opium-soaked besotted knaves were gathered together in the den at the outskirts of the city. There, amid the fumes of the soul-destroying drug, their foul tongues were loosened.

"There is a traitor within the palace!" said a thick-set man, with a scar upon his nose. He had once been a housebreaker, but, having been caught, had been sentenced to have his nose slit open with a lancet.

"How knowest thou?" asked another, holding his hookah with his left hand. For his right hand had been cut off for giving short weight to the poor in the bazaar where he was a *bunniah.*

"Last night I saw a man in a beggar's garb leave the palace. Meeting me face to face, he paused, put forth his hand as if to beg alms, then suddenly snatched back his hand and hastened into the darkness. But, in turning, his face came full in the light of the beacon on the

gate, and I recognised him. It was Rama Krishna!"

"Ay, brothers," went on a third knave, "my wife, who goes morn and night to the palace kitchen, tells a wondrous tale. This morn in clearing away the remains of Narayan Lal's supper, she saw a *chappati* [unleavened bread] uneaten. Within it was a dark stain, giving a strong pungent odour. Then coming again in the evening, whilst the juggler was away on his trial, she searched the room and came upon a small empty phial having the same odour——"

"Hast thou the phial?" a husky voice interrupted the speaker. It was the man that wore his turban low over his ear; the same that once before had bought the incriminating palm-leaf from the scribe for a gold mohur.

"In my house; not with me." A silent message passed between the two which the others could not understand. Then the speaker resumed his tale:

"And besides the phial she also found a fragment of a fig-leaf upon which were traces

of a grey powder. She cast the leaf thoughtlessly upon the kitchen fire; and it blazed up with a sudden spurt."

Then all around turned to the man that had once been a scribe in the bazaar, and asked him mockingly, "Read to us this riddle, O man of much learning!"

Thinking awhile, encircled by the opium fumes and ignoring the mockery in their tones, the scribe answered them:

"It is known to most scholars, and therefore to expert jugglers, that hair, jute, and certain other fibres are rendered non-inflammable when steeped in the sap of the *arakia*, a rare plant found only in the higher elevations of the Terai. Narayan Lal must have often used this substance—when of his own free will he affected to place fire upon his head; hence he must have kept a constant supply of it in his house. Now, when did the king seal up the bundle of straw?"

"The day before the trial," answered all. For the king had done this openly in the hall-

of-public-audience, though he had not revealed, his purpose.

"But Rama Krishna is also a scholar," went on the scribe, revelling in his own knowledge. "Thus he guessed the king's purpose, and forthwith obtained some of the *arakia* from the juggler's house. This he conveyed in the phial to some accomplice in the palace. The accomplice hid the phial in the *chappaties* intended for Narayan Lal's supper, and thus escaped the vigilance of the guards. Then just before the trial, the juggler rubbed the *arakia* into his thick glossy hair, and thus made it immune. But you have noticed in the trial, O brothers, that his *tunic* was not immune; for it was set alight by the falling sparks."

"But the grey powder?" they asked, still in doubt. "Whence came it?"

The scribe opened wide his palms. "How can I tell? It is not in the evidence!" Yet, thinking awhile, he continued: "Methinks he always had it; a juggler is wont to carry hidden about his person things that he might need at any

moment; above all, the means of making fire. Ask any street urchin for the cracker he flings upon the pavement with an explosion. You will find that it contains a grey powder and bits of broken glass. The powder alone by friction will set straw aflame. Perchance the juggler carried some of the powder hidden behind his ear. You will have noticed that twice during the feat Narayan Lal had the opportunity of raising his hand to his head; once in taking off the turban, and again just a moment before the flash. Thus was the powder reached, and afterwards mixed with the straw. Such is the reading of the riddle," the scribe concluded.

"But what of the fiery trough?" they asked him disbelievingly. "Why did that not burn his feet?"

The scribe smiled in superior wisdom. "Because in feigning to bow his head upon his feet in prayer at the edge of the trough he was really rubbing the *arakia* from his long hair into the soles of his feet and thus rendering them immune likewise. Besides, it is known to

all that if a man were to wet his hand and then to plunge it into molten iron and withdraw it quickly, within the space of a quarter of a second, the hand would be uninjured; and this he might do repeatedly if the hand were wetted afresh. For, the great heat would instantly transform the water into steam, which would form a thin coating around the hand and keep the molten iron away for that short interval.

"Now, over and above the *arakia*, the soles of Narayan Lal's feet were covered with sweat; nay, his whole body. Thus in the act of running quickly over the fiery trough the sweat was constantly rolling down his body and wetting the soles of his feet; for, before beginning the ordeal, Narayan Lal waited awhile at the edge of the trough till the intense heat had covered his body with a hundred streams of sweat. Thus, besides the *arakia*, he had a second protection to his feet." And the scribe put his lips to his neglected hookah, and refused to speak further.

But, O best beloved, the scribe was a foul

calumniator. For, in the first case, if it were a material fire that Narayan Lal had produced, then why did the Parsi, the fire-worshipper, think it but a red flower? And the piece of cloth that became a lizard, then a maize stalk, then a gold chain, and back again to cloth—was that also done by a mere material method, such as successive substitution? Or was it not rather the triumph of a superior mind over inferior ones, the juggler's over those of his spectators?

For of mere physical peril Narayan Lal's master had in store for him a full measure; a deadly peril in which his juggler's art was of no avail—an actual physical peril of appalling magnitude, to escape from which it needed not merely the utmost skill of the human mind, but also the utmost courage of the human heart.

Chapter Six

THE MAGIC SPELL

THE secret peril that had so long been hanging over Narayan Lal, like a sword held by a single thread, now fell upon him suddenly in the very hour of his hope. Half his task was over; so far he had conquered, and with the ever fulness of a youthful heart had already begun to hope for ultimate triumph. He did not know the tricks of Fate!

Yet, what man's reasoning is unable to discern, woman's presentiment, intuition, premonition, is able to foresee. The Princess Devala, so long immured in her apartments and denied all open communication with the outer world, had suddenly been stricken with a great fear for her lover's life. So far, even in his utmost peril, she had never wavered in her hope. Now for the first time her hope was shaken to its

very foundations. She tried to think, to reason; and thought and reason alike were on the side of hope. But presentiment was on the side of despair; and presentiment triumphed. Her heart was steeped in despair.

And as if relentless Fate sought to leave her not a single ray of light in this ocean of darkness, her faithful friend and companion, Leila, so long hopeful, buoyant, jubilant, was now likewise stricken with a strange despondence. Forsooth she had a greater cause for it than her mistress; for her fears had a material shape —which mad elephants could not make her reveal to the princess. Then, seeing that all else were vain in battling with this sense of impending doom, Leila went at last to her lover. For when a woman's heart is in terror, whether it be from the demons of hell or the lightning of heaven, she needs the comfort of a man's strong arm.

In the second watch of the night, when the guards had changed and Harnam Das was at his post, she came to him.

"Dost thou love me well?" she asked of him. "Dost thou love me well?"

For an answer, Harnam knelt at her feet and kissed the hem of her garment; then arising, he drew her to his breast and enfolded her in his embrace.

"Dost thou love me *above all things?*" she asked again, laying her hands upon his breast.

Harnam Das touched the hilt of his sword—then flung off his hand. Again he laid his right hand upon the hilt, and again he flung it off. The third time the hand paused upon the hilt —held it, clutched it, raised it to her right hand.

It was the homage, the fealty, the oath of allegiance he could have given to his sovereign alone. She touched the hilt with her right hand, accepting the homage. Then to show that, though his queen, she was still his slave, she replaced the sword, took his hands in hers, kissed them, and held them to her breast. Then suddenly she released them, stepped back, and faced him full.

"Thou hast said it! Thou hast proved it! Have I thy promise?"

"Thou hast my promise, my oath, my homage. Command me."

Her voice changed. The tension of her nerves gave way. So long she had held up her heart. Now the bands of strength that had encircled it snapped like reeds.

She laid her head wearily upon his breast. "Save my mistress. She is pining to death. I am impotent to aid her in her heart's desire—to prove her lover's innocence. But thou——"

"I too am impotent!" A vague apprehension was creeping over him. What was this she was asking of him—subtly insinuating? "Wouldst thou have me betray my master's trust?"—he flung her off from him in the moment's impulse—"wouldst have me perjure my soul?"

She answered him face to face. "Ay—if thou dost love me!" She stood erect before him, her veil fallen from her face, her hair streaming behind her, her hands cast up before

her. She was like unto an avenging goddess. Only her heaving breast betrayed in her the affrighted maiden.

"If thou didst love me, thou wouldst fight against hell in arms for my sake——" She turned her head quickly, and glanced behind her. A faint sound, as of a deep-drawn breath, trickled into her ear out of the dark corridor. A cold shiver passed over her frame, as if a wind from a sepulchre had struck into her bones.

She brought her lips to her lover's ear, and poured into it hot panting words. "Even as I now fight against *a palace in arms!*"

He started. A dim light was breaking upon his vision, so long obscured.

"Tell it to me."

"I know not what it is——" She glanced around her wildly. A while ago, in fighting her own battles singled-handed, she had played the man, the man of blood and iron. Now beside her lover she had become a weak fragile woman, trembling like a frightened deer.

"Unseen footsteps pursue me. Swift shadows start up from behind pillars and colonnades, dog my footsteps, overtake me, envelop me, then vanish in the dark. I hear muttered curses around me, threatening my life. But yesterday I was at my meal. Ere I took a mouthful, the hill *myna* thou didst give me flew down from its perch and rested on my arm. It pecked at a ripe red mango, flew back to its perch—fluttered its wings, then dropped down dead. A poisoned fruit, remember! None but a fiend with the knowledge of all *jehannum* could have done that. . . . And not my life alone! Oh, how can I tell thee? Turn away thy face, and spare me the shame of my eyes!" She laid her head upon his shoulder so that she could whisper into his ear, her face unseen.

A broken sob struggled through her lips. "Wouldst thou have me in bridal—bereft of the flower of my virtue?"

His jaws came down like a vice, his hand clutched at the hilt of the sword—his fingernails burying themselves deep into the palm, un-

consciously. "Go on!" he muttered between his breath. "Tell me all!"

"The night before the attempt on my life I was passing a dark corridor. As I approached a pillar a thick blanket descended upon me from nowhere, a rough hand fell upon my mouth over the blanket, another upon my belt—beneath the blanket." For Leila was a "belted woman," a maiden whose duty it was to wear a belt from her childhood in symbol alike of her birth and her virtue; a girdle that no man might touch, save her wedded spouse.

"Go on! Do not fear!" It was a pent-up volcano that spoke beside her in forced calmness.

"Nay, I was spared. The man dragged me through the corridor; but even as he was lifting me over the steps before a threshold, my belt gave way; I slipped though his arm and fell upon the floor. For that single instant my mouth was released from his other hand; I emptied my heart in one piercing shriek. The sound of hurrying footsteps, the clamour of ap-

proaching voices—and the man whipped off the blanket and fled down the corridor. When the eunuchs reached me, I was voiceless. They marvelled, thinking I had seen a spirit."

"None whom thou dost suspect?"

She wavered. "Yes; let me tell thee all. That night I came to thee with the sweetmeats a shadow pounced upon me. . . . Save for my dagger, I had been undone. But now seek for a man with a scar upon his cheek or ear—I know not which."

Harnam Das bowed his head. Then stretching forth his hand to the armoury on the wall beside him he took down three daggers; small, but of the finest Jeypur make.

"Meanwhile take these. One for thyself; one for thy mistress—if the verdict of the gods be against her. The third to hold for a sudden need, if thou shouldst lose the first. Now go in peace. But tell me first: what wouldst thou have me do?"

"Guard thy prisoner from *unseen perils!* For the hour of his next trial is at hand. If he dies,

my mistress dies likewise. And I? I go with my mistress! Dost thou understand me?"

Harnam Das paused awhile, then bowed his head. "It is written. Kismet, fate! Mine and thine! . . . I believe at last that he is innocent; my love for thee has made me believe. But I owe a duty to my king, and *consciously* shall permit none to aid and abet him to escape. Yet that very duty bids me guard him from perils that my master does not forsee. Now go in peace. He is at least safe in my charge."

The next morn Narayan Lal's master sent word to him in his dungeon:

"Thou must find the Temple of the *Manik*, enter it, and fetch me the precious gem that lies therein. Within the hour must thou set forth. Pray meanwhile."

Know, O Joy of the Palace (said the Story-teller unto the Great King), that of all gems the *manik* is the most precious. Heap diamond upon ruby, ruby upon sapphire, sapphire upon emerald, emerald upon opal, opal upon ame-

thyst, and the heap will be to a single *manik* as a glimmering oil-lamp to the noonday sun. Such is the virtue of that mystic gem.

The *manik* of my tale was given by one of the gods to a great hero of antiquity. But he having sinned grievously against his benefactor, a monstrous serpent came out of the jungle and devoured him and the gem he wore.

Yet so great was the hardness of the stone that it stuck in the serpent's throat, and eventually forced its way to its head; so that when it roamed about the jungle the gem shone like a beacon-light.

Soon a mighty prince arose, who was also a magician learned in mystic lore. He slew the serpent and obtained possession of the *manik*.[1]

[1] The terrible cobra-di-capello is popularly believed in India to be the lineal descendant of this serpent. Probably the legend arose from the spectacled marking on the cobra's head, which was deemed to be the setting for this stone. Most of the historic gems that have come out of India have similar legends attached to their origin, *e.g.*, the Koh-i-noor, the Orloff Diamond (on the Russian sceptre), the Pitt, the Regent, etc.

But that gem was a curse—the curse of the ingratitude of its first human owner. The prince was seized with an incurable disease. He made vows to every shrine in the land, and yet was not healed.

Then in despair he listened to the doctrines of a new faith, an heretical faith that had just arisen, and was induced to bestow the gem upon its false god, a one-eyed god.

Thou knowest, O Protector of the Faith, that at the sources of the Ganges are the sacred shrines of Hardwar. What is not so well known in these latter days is that at the sources of the Jumna—which is only three days' march from the Ganges—there is another shrine, but now buried beneath the ashes of Time. Even its probable situation is merely guessed at from a gigantic eminence in the depth of the forest, under which it is supposed to lie.

This prince built the temple for his false god, to whom he had given the *manik* as an eye. He selected the site so carefully that it could only be approached from one side along a dark

ravine. That ingress is now probably lost in the growth of the jungle.

Likewise, he took such means for the safety of the gem itself, that anyone attempting to despoil the god should die an instant death. And lest perchance those who made the contrivance that secured this end should reveal it to others, he slew them with his own hand.

Yet because of his own perfidy in forsaking the gods of his birth, his disease was not cured. He died in violent agony, crying out at the moment of death in vain remorse that until a man was born—who, having received favours, was not guilty of ingratitude—no human hand should own that gem. And it is whispered to this day that his spirit guards the gem from generation to generation in whatever incarnation he may be, human or bestial. No man has entered that temple and come back alive.

Now Narayan Lal, having received many favours, was accused of the basest ingratitude. Also thou knowest, O Seat of Wisdom, that once a curse is uttered by the gods, it remains

in force until its cause is removed—even though centuries should have elapsed.

So, if Narayan Lal was guilty of ingratitude, the curse of the *manik* would fall upon him. Moreover, unless divinely aided because of his innocence, he would die a terrible death the moment he touched the eye of the god. For in itself the venture was full of the deepest peril. Thus reasoned Narayan Lal's master, and bade him set forth to the temple within the hour.

And within the hour a tall white-bearded form, enveloped in a long shawl, stole up to the guard at the prison door.

"I am his *guru*," he whispered, pointing to Kali's vermilion upon his brow. "He is in danger of death. The king bids him pray. I am here to pray with him."

The guard bowed his head to the royal word, and allowed him entrance.

Softly the *guru* closed the door after him, glancing quickly around to note the solitary window high up near the roof.

"Whence is this to me, that my master should deign to come to the hovel of his slave?" murmured the youth, casting himself at the *guru's* feet.

But the high priest raised him from the ground, saying:

"The gods grant that the day may come when I shall kneel to thee." Then seeing the look of wonder upon the other's face, he hastily checked the dawning hope. "Nay, my son, that comes after—if it ever comes; pray that it may. But now I am here for thy more immediate need."

With skinny hands he brought out a musty scroll from under his shawl.

"This book might guide thee in thy new venture," he said to the youth. "It contains traditions handed down from countless ages, written down from book to book when each was in tatters. Thou knowest that it is one of the duties of our order to preserve public archives."

He turned over the yellow leaves, peering

under his whitened brows for the place he sought.

"A few words only; with that thou must be content. It is written that when the builder of that temple was on his death-bed, he cried out in delirium some incoherent words that his friends heard, but could not understand."

Then lowering his voice to a low impressive whisper, he read these words:

"'*Where falls the light . . . third from the full.*'

"What the last words mean, I know not," he continued. "The first, thou must find. But it is also written that that prince died on the night of the full moon following the festival of Kali. So, whatever the words may mean, I would pray thee to make the attempt on the third night after the full moon following the night of Kali, which is now at hand. And I will beseech the benign goddess to help thee that night against evil spirits."

Then without a word, and ere Narayan Lal knew of his purpose, the *guru* passed his right

hand over the youth's face, holding a small dark phial in the hand. With a sudden gasp the youth took in the strong odour in a single breath, reeled, fell backwards to the ground. But the *guru* caught him up ere he reached the floor, raised him up, and laid him tenderly on the couch.

Narayan lay motionless and still, breathing scarce perceptibly; then gradually he began to move restlessly from side to side, his breath coming irregularly in spasmodic gasps.

Gently the *guru* placed his hands upon the youth's head and face, soothing the disturbing spirit. At last it seemed laid to rest. The limbs lay limp and inert upon the bed, the respiration was slow and measured, the pulsation regular and mechanical. The *guru* raised the eyelids, first the one and then the other, and gazed upon them.

The eyeballs had turned upwards, so that the pupils lay hidden beneath the brows.

Then sitting down by the bed, the *guru*

breathed upon the sleeper's face, and began to question him in a low monotone.

"What seest thou?"

A sudden quiver shot through the youth's entire frame, as if he were seized with an ague fit.

"What seest thou?" came the question again, in a deep relentless voice.

Mechanically the lips opened, and the sleeper answered in a high petulant voice like a fractious child:

"A black cloud. It is all darkness."

"See again. Lift the veil. Seek among caverns and pools and ravines—a thousand years ago!"

Suddenly the youth started. He spoke in a low frightened whisper:

"*The Speckled Band!*"

"What is her rank?"

"*The Queen of the Serpent Brood!*"

"What is her crown?"

"*The Gem of Life!*"

Then the old man breathed anew upon his face.

"What seest thou?"

"*The Magic Prince!*"

"Where stands he now?"

"*In the Cavern of a Thousand Nights.*"

"What faces him there?"

"*The Serpent-Queen, guarding her crown.*"

"Who wins?"

"*The Magic Prince—slaying the Serpent-Queen!*"

"Who takes the gem?"

"*The Magic Prince.*"

Once again he breathed upon the sleeper's face, deeper, longer.

"What seest thou?"

"*The Temple of Ten Thousand Pillars!*"

"Who owns the fane?"

"*The One-eyed God!*"

"What is his eye?"

"*The Gem of Life!*"

"Who placed it there?"

"*The Magic Prince.*"

"For ever?"

"*For ever!*"

"Who robs the gem——?"

"*Dies from the suspended axe!*"

"But he who hung it there?"

"*First pulled the catch that stayed the axe!*"

"Where stands the secret?"

"*Where falls the light from the false God's nostrils.*"

"Who now guards the fane?"

"*The Spirit of the Serpent-Queen.*"

"Can she harm thee?"

"*Ay, to grind my bones to dust in her coils!*"

"What talisman to save thee from her coils?"

"*None—but that of Love!*"

"Then, sleeper, awake!" the *guru* cried, emptying his breath in one deep gust over the youth's face. "For none other can save thee from thy fate!"

With a start Narayan Lal awoke from his dream, remembering nothing of what he had dreamt. But the *guru* told him all.

"Go, my son, to meet thy destiny. That which is written upon thy brow from the hour of

thy birth shall be fulfilled—demons and devils, savage beasts and human brutes, ay, thunder and earthquake notwithstanding." Saying this, the *guru* departed.

But scarce had he left, and whilst yet the guard was showing him out, a small roll of dried plantain-leaves fell into Narayan Lal's room from across the doorway. But that roll reached the ground with a thud that leaves alone could not make. Marvelling exceedingly, the young man opened it.

It was a small dagger of the finest Jeypur make. And with swimming eyes he read these words inside the leaves:

"*For the eye of the false god. This dagger hath a twin—which will find its sheath in its owner's heart, if thou dost not return.*"

"And this in mine, if I fail," murmured the youth, pressing his beloved's gift to his lips fervently.

Outside, in escorting the high priest out, the

guard came upon a waiting-maid hurrying through the corridor, He guessed that from her garb; for her face was veiled. Her mission there he knew not—and perchance was loth to ask. . . .

Chapter Seven

IN THE GRIP OF THUGS

WITHIN the hour of the king's command Narayan Lal was brought before his master. Under an escort of fifty men commanded by Harnam Das, he was bidden to set forth to the hills in search of the Temple of the Manik.

Ten days' march would take him there; ten days he might spend in his venture; ten days more would bring him back. At the end of the month he must place the gem in his master's hand.

"If thou are killed in the Temple, thy sins will have found thee out. If thou darest not to enter, my men will return with thy head." Thus bade the king as they departed.

That night a silent figure stole out of the palace from the furthest wing. None saw him

leave—so he thought. Three hours later a red glare leapt into the sky from a plateau that began its rise twelve miles away, but which extended still further northwards.

"The first night's encampment," they said at the palace. And when afterwards for five nights, gazing from the watch-tower of the palace, they saw the fire further and further away, they truly felt that it marked the line of Narayan's march.

Thus knowing what the fools would believe, the man who had stolen out chuckled to himself and returned boldly to the palace an hour before daybreak.

But nearing the outer wall, he suddenly stumbled upon something in the dark. It was a mendicant sitting upon the ground, with his back to the wall, counting his beads silently.

The jemadar cursed him beneath his breath, then crept into the palace. But the mendicant, smiling grimly, leapt to his feet and vanished into the dark—towards the plateau.

Meanwhile Narayan Lal and his guards had

reached the foot of the hills. The country grew wilder and more rugged. Dense jungles and dark ravines alternated with yawning chasms and sudden precipices. Giant trees, piercing the clouds, towered on the sloping hillside in solitary grandeur. Volcanic boulders of awful dimensions, wrenched from the mountain by some colossal upheaval in the past, rested in unstable equilibrium where they had fallen.

Out in the far distance, on the ninth day, they discerned the faint outlines of a gigantic eminence. It might have been some patriarchal banyan-tree covering many an acre, or some bygone edifice over and above whose dilapidated form there grew in tangled heap the forest progeny of many centuries.

Towards evening they came within clear vision of the eminence—and there stopped. There was no passage beyond. It was all a dense mass of bush and jungle.

For a while they were puzzled, disconcerted. Then a sharp turn to the west revealed a steep declivity that in the prehistoric past might have

been a pathway. Along this they threaded their way in single file, till, they came to a sudden fall.

The earth lay beneath their feet in a long dark ravine. It was so narrow that a mountain-goat might not turn within its base.

"Thus far we go, and no further," spoke the leader of the guards. "Thy mission lies yonder. We wait for thee here."

Narayan Lal could find no immediate answer. He had eleven days yet in which to make the attempt; the sooner he began, the better. On the other hand, the moon was only eight days old; six more would bring it to the full. The third from the full was nine days off. If he failed on that night, there would still be two days left—if he survived.

"I, too, wait—awhile," answered Narayan Lal.

They returned to the mouth of the declivity, and finding a large *sal* tree half a mile beyond, pitched their tents beneath it.

On the evening of the seventh day—that is,

two days before Narayan Lal could attempt the search for the gem—they escorted him to the ravine, placing two resinous torches in his hands to guide his path.

"If I am not with you again on the third night," he told the guards, "count me dead."

With that he descended into the gully, whilst the guards returned to their tents, knowing that there was no egress for Narayan Lal, save past them. But for greater security Harnam Das, the captain of the guards, posted five men at the very mouth of the ravine; for, struck by a strange presentiment, he sought to close it not merely from exit but also from the ingress of unknown foes. The five men sat down under a peepul-tree at the mouth of the ravine, smoking their hookahs—till they were to be relieved by their comrades half a mile away.

Narayan Lal threaded his way through the stony gorge; risked breaking his neck circuiting a huge boulder that jutted out from the hillside like a giant's clenched fist, fingers downwards; floundered ankle-deep in mud over an

ancient river-bed, climbed with slippery feet a narrow winding ledge on the other side, and disappeared from the sight of the guards. . . .

The shades of night had fallen; the earth was wrapped in darkness. At the second watch, at the hour of midnight, Harnam Das came with four of his comrades to relieve the five guards at the mouth of the ravine. A hundred cubits afar he gave the sign; but there was no countersign in response. Coming nearer, he saw by the flickering fire of dried leaves the men had enkindled that they were all reclining upon the ground. At twenty paces he repeated the sign; but still there was no answer. With vague apprehension he drew nigh.

The five men were all reclining on their right side, their legs doubled up beneath them as when seated upon the ground, the head of each resting upon the earth on its right side. The right hand of each still clutched the hookah.

They were all dead!

He felt each body: it was still warm. He

glanced at the fire: it was flickering low; might have been tended two hours ago. He touched each *chillum* (bowl) of the hookahs; it was quite cold.

The men had died an hour ago, perhaps more. But less than two.

He examined each body in detail to discover the cause of death; and scarce had he raised the head from the earth, when the cause of death was all too clear.

On the left side of the neck there was a deep wound, severing the jugular vein. A sharp thrust downwards with a dagger or a sword might have made the wound. The assassin might have stood before his victim in dealing the blow. But Harnam Das examined each face, and found it calm and serene, with no fear of death upon it. Death had been painless and instantaneous. The assassin could not have approached his victim from the front.

From the back? That was only possible if the blow had been dealt with the left hand. But were the five assassins, who had approached

their victims from the back simultaneously, all left-handed? That was scarce probable. Harnam Das scrutinised the ground behind each, but the hard earth yielded no trace of an advancing or receding foot-print.

"From above!" a deep guttural voice answered him from the darkness of the night.

With quickening breath a tall gaunt form emerged from the forest. It was Rama Krishna.

"Am I too late?" Then glancing quickly at each face of the dead, and seeing that Narayan Lal was not numbered among them, a deep sigh of relief burst from his panting lips.

"It is fate—kismet!" he said to the guards, bowing his head. "I was hastening up from the plains below to avert this"—waving his hand to the dead—"but now let us avenge it!"

"But say, whose work is it?" Harnam Das asked of him, clutching at the hilt of his sword.

In answer the pundit lit a torch at the fire and silently went to the rear of the peepul-tree beneath which they stood. There, at the back

of the trunk, he bent his eye to the ground; in vain; the parched earth refused a clue. Then circling round towards the mouth of the ravine, he suddenly stopped and motioned to Harnam Das to approach. There, just beyond the shelter of the tree, the earth was soft with recent rain. Naked footprints! Each pointing to the ravine. How many they could scarce tell; for the footprints were in single file.

The pundit returned to the tree a moment, glancing upwards. Just above the dead guards a network of branches met his gaze. The guards had chosen that spot beneath for the protection the branches afforded them from the rain; but that very fact had been their undoing. The branches were scarce ten feet away.

"Within reach of a lance thrust!" muttered the pundit. "As the men sat beneath, they were within seven feet of the boughs; and when they turned their heads to pull at their hookahs, they bared their necks—at the vital part. A simultaneous thrust from above, and they died without a cry."

"But from whom? Dost suspect——"

"Thugs!"

And at the single word Harnam Das started. But already the pundit was back to the ravine.

"Whither goest thou?"

"To the rescue—and to vengeance! If thou dost know thy duty, thou wilt come likewise!"

"I come," Harnam answered shortly. He motioned to his men, and three of them followed him; the fourth returned to the encampment to bring up a fresh patrol.

"How many are they?" Harnam asked after awhile.

"Perhaps five, perhaps fifty," the pundit answered. "Five entered the ravine to-night. How many more were waiting within I know not."

Harnam Das glanced at his slender force: four armed men in all! The pundit shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Wouldst fight with swords against Thugs? I tell thee, thou must fight with thy *head*, not thy right arm. These are crafty men, full of

tricks and stratagems. We must fight them with stratagem as deep, not with brute force. Now come!"

They circuited round the boulder, crossed the ancient river-bed, gained the narrow ledge opposite, and vanished behind it.

Meanwhile let us follow Narayan Lal in his perilous task.

When Narayan Lal left the ravine he knew not which way to turn. The ledge on which he stood divided at that point. On his right was a gradual slope upwards sparsely dotted with trees; on his left a pathway downwards, leading to a cluster of dense jungle and bushes. He chose the upward course. After a while the region altered in aspect. A forest of tall deodars, sal, and toon met his gaze. A full hour he kept to the forest, then beyond it came to a small open space. The sound of murmuring waters trickled into his ear. On the further side of the clearing there was a stream. His path was checked on that side.

Turning a little to the west he came to a hill. Its flank lay parallel with the stream; and gazing beyond the stream in the enshrouding gloom he caught a glimpse of a rising eminence looming in the distance. He understood: the stream flowed between the two. If his search failed upon this hillside, he must cross the stream and try his fate upon the eminence.

But approaching the hill, he saw a dark cavern at its base. The gloom was now impenetrable, his torches flickering low. He must wait for the morn to resume his task.

He ate of the *chappaties* (unleavened bread) that Harnam Das had given him and which he had brought in his girdle, and drank from the stream. Then entering the cavern, he searched for a bed. To his surprise the cavern seemed long and endless. He had hoped to lie beside the inner wall; but though he had come twenty paces from the mouth, there was still an endless void before him.

Glancing around, he saw a small recess on the left formed by a large projecting boulder.

Behind this he gathered together an armful of leaves from the clearing outside, and lay down to rest. The torches he placed beside the boulder. They flickered awhile, spluttered, then died out in ashes. He was now in inky darkness. . . .

How long he slept he knew not. Returning slowly to consciousness, it was his ear that first resumed its function. A vague confused sound seemed to trickle into it; but between sleep and consciousness as he was, he could scarce tell whether it was a real material sound or merely the ending of a dream. Then his nostrils came to his aid: a strong smell of something burning. A while after, his half-closed eyelids: a sudden flash of light before them. In vague apprehension he sat up—then suddenly crouched low behind the boulder—holding his very breath.

Before him were six stealthy forms!

Each man clutched a long lance with his right hand, a spluttering torch high above his head with the left. They were peering into the impenetrable darkness of the cavern beyond.

"He has come this way!" It was a low whisper from the leader; a man with fierce overhanging eyebrows, his turban woven with his long hair and worn low over the forehead. "We shall catch him surely."

"Ay; the remains of his supper lie outside," answered the second, wearing his turban likewise as his leader. "He must be within."

A sudden sinking came over Narayan Lal's heart. It was *he* whom they sought! Why, he did not pause to ask. A glance at the six men on the other side of the boulder was enough. Their character was revealed in their turbans of mingled hair and cloth. They were Thugs upon the war-path! Merciless fiends who would steep their hands in his blood for the lust of gold, or for the mere pleasure of it.

He lay but six feet away. A sudden curiosity on the part of a single foe, a slight divergence of the file of Thugs to the left, and he was lost. But intent upon their search, and thinking him to be still ahead, they passed the boulder one by one, following in their leader's wake.

Into the black darkness beyond. Their bodies passed from view; only six flaming torches held aloft could Narayan Lal see in the depth of the cavern. Then even they passed out of sight.

Narayan Lal's first impulse was to emerge quickly and escape by the entrance. He came out from behind the boulder, stepped to the middle of the cavern—then suddenly fell flat upon his face.

At the entrance he saw two more torches: two more Thugs on guard! His retreat was cut off! He was trapped!

Slowly, imperceptibly, he crawled back to his hiding-place behind the boulder. There he must lie. His fate hung upon the caprice of the gods.

A while after he caught the flash of torches again in the depth of the cavern. The six Thugs were returning! Then a horrible apprehension smote him. Now looking towards him, they were sure to espy him as they approached the boulder!

He glanced around: the boulder was scarce

large enough to hide his whole body from view when seen from the *inner* side of the cavern. He might curl his head and half his body behind the boulder in a semicircle, but his feet would betray him—even though he were to place them flat on their side along the ground. The glistening soles would catch the glare of the returning torches, and reveal him to the foe.

In frantic haste he tortured his brain for some plan. . . . Slowly it germinated in his mind, all too slow for such urgent need. And at best it was but a slender chance. He must try it, or be lost.

He scooped up the bed of dry leaves upon which he was lying, and placed them loose upon his feet and legs up to the knees. Loose and in a natural manner, as if they had been driven in by wind or tide. Then holding his breath, and praying the gods to send blindness to his foemen's eyes and deafness to their ears, he lay curled round the boulder.

The six Thugs came past him, cursing softly, asking for his blood. For one brief moment

Narayan Lal thought, with rising hope in his heart, that they would depart altogether. But they only went to the entrance to recall their outposts there. The eight Thugs came back to the interior and sat down to rest. An arm's length from the boulder!

"Perchance he has escaped into the innermost cavern."

"Then we have him safe——"

"As if he were in hiding behind this very rock!" The speaker struck the left-hand side of the boulder with his lance. Lying with his head curled inwards, the spear-point came to rest but a span from Narayan Lal's face. "I shall carry back his head to the Master upon my lance!"

Changing his aim in wanton mood, the speaker stabbed at the right-hand side of the boulder. The sharp steel glanced off the rock and crashed into the pile of leaves. There was a sharp twitching of Narayan's Lal's lips. He clenched down his teeth to smother the cry of pain—but dared not move his feet. He left them to the

mercy of the playful lance. The thin stream of blood oozed out of the wounded ankle and bedewed the leaves. The lance came again, and in sportive mood transfixed the leaves.

The Thug withdrew the weapon, and held up the bunch of leaves at its point as a trophy.

"See, the leaves are red. It is blood!"

"Thou hast killed a sleeping rat!'

"Go behind the boulder, and search for the body."

"Ay, I shall," replied the Thug, rising up.

"And carry it back to the Master upon thy lance!" sneered the leader, stopping the sport. "We must arise at earliest dawn; now let us rest."

Narayan Lal heard them dispose themselves to sleep, but they were long in the deed. An intense longing came over him to shift his wounded foot, but he dared not yet awhile. Perchance the agony was too great; perchance some unbidden sound escaped his pursed lips. Witness, O Fate, that when we would be silent as death, would scarce dare to breathe for dear

life, that very instant all nature is at war within us to make us breathe hard, to cough, to sneeze—to rend our very soul in noise and clamour. Perchance there was some slight movement in Narayan's Lal's limbs. He knew not. But he saw a dark shadow looming *over* the boulder. It was well for him in that hour that all the torches were then out. The Thug stabbed with his lance into the darkness beyond the boulder, and meeting the solid wall opposite, was satisfied. Once he brought down the point —and just grazed Narayan's left arm; but for the roundness of the boulder his heart had been transfixed. Then, assured that it was but a squeaking rat, the Thug retired to rest.

Gradually the sounds died out. Long the youth waited, too long it seemed in the pain. Then at last there came to his ear the welcome sound of the regular and long-drawn breathing of tired men locked in slumber.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he drew up his legs, and sat up. Upon hands and knees he crept, along the inner wall—towards the inte-

rior of the cavern; for there was no exit past the Thugs. With a slight thud he knocked his knee against a projection, and fell flat upon his face. A light sleeper stirred, woke up, raised his head, and peered into the darkness. Feeling with his hand, the Thug picked up an extinct torch and flung it over his head.

"Curse those skulking rats!" he muttered, and lay down to rest.

The torch struck the wall a yard above Narayan's head, recoiled, and fell before him. Thinking a moment, he picked up the torch. But full forty beats of his heart he counted and yet forty more, ere he dared to move. Then crouching along the wall, he worked his way inwards into the cavern.

Coming at last beyond earshot of his foes, he sat on the ground, tore off the end of his turban, and tied up his wounded ankle; for that was his most urgent need. Limping in pain, he went further and further inwards, groping along the wall to guide his path. Where the cavern led he could not tell, nor cared. His

one thought now was to flee from his relentless foes. Sufficient for the moment was the existing peril. In that moment of pain, had his judgment been clearer, he would at least have anticipated the possibility of other perils—that perchance in fleeing from one, he was falling into another. . . .

Suddenly he saw a dim hazy light ahead. He paused in thought. What could it be? Cautiously he made his way. The light grew slightly clearer, though yet it was but a diffused glare. Thirty paces, twenty, and he turned a sudden corner. His heart stood still. A great bitterness rose up within him; he cursed Fate.

Before him was the other end of the cavern; the cavern was but a long tunnel beneath the hill he had seen that evening beside the stream. But ten paces from the opening he saw a small fire of dried leaves and twigs, beside it three men stretched upon the ground: Thugs. He was between two fires!

His first thought was to retrace his steps.

Then the utter hopelessness of his position struck him full, sending a chill into his heart. No, if he must needs take the plunge, let it be forward! Better to die advancing than retreating.

Thinking awhile and resolved to die, he crawled up to the sleeping forms on hands and knees. Stretching forth his right hand, he held the torch he carried to the side of the fire. He only prayed in his inmost soul that it would catch alight before his merciless foes awoke. True, he had flint and tinder at his girdle; but to light the torch by them would have awakened the Thugs. It was well for him that the torch had already been lit once, and was dry. It did not splutter. But too slow was the fire at its work; so it seemed to his aching heart, though it beat but seven times meanwhile.

That instant he rose to his feet, took a long deep breath, and gathered his limbs for the leap. The next he hurled himself over the fire, over the prostrate forms—flinging the torch backwards over his head into the *interior* of the cavern. In a single second after reaching earth he

covered the ten paces to the mouth. Then wheeling sharp round, he fled helter-skelter up the hillside.

Behind him the awakened Thugs leapt to their feet. Seeing the flaming torch *within* the tunnel, they sprang to it—thinking they should find their quarry fallen beside it. Then realising the deceit, they rushed out of the cavern in hot pursuit.

But in the short respite their prey was already out of sight. They knew not which way he had fled. In the darkness they could see nothing. Then with devilish cunning they lay low upon the ground, with ear to earth. The faint sound of soft footfall upon moss and creeper! Their quarry had fled *up* the hill! (Had the sound been that of breaking twigs and brambles, they had known that the fugitive had gone towards the jungle below.)

Hot-footed they scrambled up the hill. A dense screen of creepers rose up before them. The foremost pursuer had his hand upon the screen to part it—when his comrade behind

pulled him back. The next instant all three were upon their faces, with ear to earth. One crawled to the right along the screen, one to the left; the third remained listening. In ten seconds the first stopped, rose up, and ran back swiftly to his starting point; for the sound along the ground to the right had grown fainter and fainter. But the man on the left hastened on, and did not return. Then his two comrades behind understood that the sound had *increased* that way! They plunged forward to the left and overtook the other Thug.

All three ran along the screen of creepers, till suddenly behind a projecting rock they came to a stop. Yes, there was the gap in the screen! Their quarry had made it in his hasty flight! They plunged into the gap, now sure of their prey.

And Narayan Lal? A hundred cubits he had put between himself and his pursuers, before they were at the gap; but a hundred cubits was all too little for such need. Already his swollen ankle caused him intense agony; a little more,

and he should fall moaning to the ground in his foemen's path. Yet he struggled on with clenched teeth, lest an inadvertent cry of pain should betray him. It was well for him that the lowering clouds above hid the moon; he blessed the darkness, thankful for even such small mercy. Then suddenly a break in the fleeing clouds revealed him for an instant to the Thugs. He heard the cry of cruel exultation behind—and went headlong in his last despairing effort. Half wheeling to the right in the returning darkness, he sought the shelter of a low thicket he had noticed in the flash of moonlight. Behind it he cast himself flat upon the earth, gasping for breath. Whether the Thugs had also noticed the thicket, he knew not. From their position lower down the hill, and having eyes for him alone, perchance it had escaped their ken in the short flash of moonlight; and in the returning darkness perchance they would miss it full fifty cubits on the right, and go straight up the hill instead. He prayed they would. That was his sole chance.

Then in response to his prayer the thunder-laden clouds parted with a sudden clap. A torrent of rain came down. A moment after the wind swept down upon the hill with a mighty roar. Gathering force each moment from the very resistance it encountered, it hurled itself down at last upon the hill-top in fierce anger, and, meeting the tall trees upon the summit, mowed them down as with a scythe. The next instant it caught up the fallen giants and flung them off the summit towards the side of the stream as if they were but wisps of straw. For it was a tropical cyclone before which all nature must bow and lie impotent. The lowly bushes, the suppliant reed, the yielding grass, it alone spared; the stubborn and the mighty it swept away from the hillside.

And from his inmost heart Narayan Lal blest the storm. He took off the bandage from his ankle and let the cool rain play upon it. He felt with his fingers tenderly, and discovered to his intense relief that the wound was but in the flesh; the muscle and tendon had been spared. A

small pool of water formed before him; into it he placed his foot, and lying back, reposed awhile on the ground, thinking.

Judging by the position of the moon in the brief flash, it was yet two hours from the break of dawn. Within that he must escape from the hill; for in the coming light he would be lost.

But how? If he went towards the summit, he would be observed by the three Thugs there. If he descended the hill, his only exit that way was by the cavern: and there he might run straight into the arms of the foes he had left behind earlier in the night.

Suddenly he remembered the stream he had noticed that evening. Did it flow past this side of the hill? . . . He too put his ear to the ground, and waited. . . .

A full hour he waited. The storm abated. Gradually the raging wind died out. Then another sound arose in his ear: yes, the rushing of swollen waters!

Quickly he bandaged up his ankle, soaking

the cloth in the pool. Thinking awhile, calculating the direction, he curved round slightly to the left, and crawled upon his hands and knees over the soft moss.

How long, he could not tell; it seemed a long century to him. In his deep anxiety to reach the goal, he failed to notice for a moment that the moss and creepers had grown scarcer; that he was now upon harder ground. Suddenly he knocked his knee against a rock, stifling a cry of pain. But that rock had saved him from a peril he had scarce realised in the darkness. Now stretching out his right hand overhead, he began to feel cautiously ere he proceeded. Thrice his own length, and his hand touched the sharp edge of the rock, sloping downwards.

Yes, that was the end of the cliff; one step further, and he would have fallen head foremost into the stream below.

But how far was the stream? He picked up a stone with the left hand, laid the thumb of his right hand upon the left wrist, lightly cast the stone over the edge of the cliff, and from that

instant begun to count his pulse. One, two, three—then the splash. The stream was a full hundred cubits below!

Worse than that. The left hand had only jerked the stone forward lightly. It could not have gone more than five cubits horizontally; and yet it had not touched the hillside in its fall. He understood: the cliff was a perpendicular wall at that point.

Keeping along the edge, he began to work his way downwards along the slope of the hill. A while after he stood up, and flung a stone over his head with all his strength; and heard the answering splash. He jerked another stone *lightly*, as he had done awhile ago: and heard a soft thud, another, and then the splash. The cliff had begun to slope out towards the stream.

Thus he made his way down the hillside, till at last dropping a stone from the edge he heard the thud within a second. There was a ledge below him, within ten cubits!

Proceeding a little further down to make quite sure, he dropped lightly upon the ledge.

From there to gain the stream by successive stages was but the work of time.

With newborn hope in his heart he felt the water at his feet. He was a good swimmer; if he could but see his way to avoid sunken rocks he would surely cross the stream in safety. The swift-coming dawn broke upon him without notice. A moment more, and he would be in the stream. . . .

That instant he heard a reverberating sound overhead; it was a huge boulder thundering down the hillside. It came from ledge to ledge, then plunged into the water five cubits ahead, just where he would have been now. In vague apprehension he gazed up.

In the dim light he saw three grinning faces peering at him over the edge of the cliff.

His first impulse was to plunge into the stream before the next boulder came. But a second's thought made him recoil into the shelter of the bank. What avail now to cross the stream in sight of his foes? Surely, they too could

cross? The utmost effort of human fortitude, of physical pain and endurance, had failed to save him from these relentless foes. He must try stratagem. . . .

Meanwhile the Thugs on the hill-top parted. Two ran down the slope towards their quarry; the third hastened the opposite way to warn his comrades at the mouth of the cavern so that they might watch the stream there in case Narayan Lal attempted to run along the bank and take to the stream from that point.

Long they waited there watching the stream; the eight Thugs and their comrade who had brought the warning. The broad daylight was now upon the stream, but they saw nothing.

"Perhaps he has run up the hillside again, and is now hiding at the summit."

"Then surely we shall catch him," answered the Thug who had joined them. "The storm has swept it bare of trees, and there is no hiding-place."

"Ay, brother; thou dost speak truly," the

leader of the gang replied, waving his hand to the stream.

For upon the stream was a mighty sal-tree floating down, roots foremost. Half its leafy boughs were submerged, the other half forming a canopy at the head. The tree passed within a lance-throw of the Thugs; then the swift current caught it in a bend in the stream, twirled it round as if it were but a cockle-shell, and cast it upon the bank opposite at a point that seemed to be at the foot of the eminence.

And all the morning the Thugs waited for their prey, and found him not. Then, dividing their forces, they left three men at the stream beside the cavern, and with the rest scoured the hillside. All day they searched for their quarry; still in vain.

And all day the sal-tree lay upon the opposite bank; in its leafy canopy a silent form lay hid all day. Thrice the pangs of hunger had nearly driven him out to forage for food; but still he stayed within the shelter, waiting for nightfall. In crossing the stream on the tree

in the very sight of his foe, he had run enough risk for the day. He now prayed for darkness to continue his task.

Verily, all this was but a prelude. The full tragedy yet remained. He had yet to find the precious *manik*, or perish!

Chapter Eight

THE TEMPLE OF THE MANIK

AT nightfall Narayan Lal emerged from his hiding-place and looked around. Making his way along the bank, he saw a low clump of trees, at its edge a plantain-tree; in that region it grew wild like mushrooms. He ate of its luscious fruit in ravenous hunger, and quenched his thirst from the stream.

Then turning to the inland, he saw before him a seeming plateau, with a gentle slope upwards. This he ascended; reaching the top quickly, he saw a level stretch of earth dotted with thicket along its length. In the dim starlight he made his way for a full hour. Passing by a pine-tree, he picked up a short dry branch fallen to the ground. Plucking off the withered leaves, and flattening the top against a stone to expose the resinous fibres, he made a torch

of it. But not till he was past the thickets, and hidden by them from all possible observation from his foes on the hill-top on the other side of the stream, did he venture to bring out the flint and tinder from his girdle and light the torch.

Suddenly the plateau sloped down to a ravine. Beyond it he saw again the gigantic eminence he had noticed the day before. Seen across the stream, it had appeared so near; now he realised that it was a long league further. Descending the slope, he threaded his way again on to the other side, then came to an abrupt pause, knowing not which way to turn. Behind him was the deep ravine he had just quitted, before him the perpendicular rock. Then examining this closer, he found hidden beneath a growth of moss and creepers the mouth of a dark grotto. It seemed a mere crack on the face of the rock.

Bending low to his knees and holding aloft the torch, he stepped forward to the grotto. The next instant he stood rooted to the spot. A cry, a wail, rang in his ear; an infant's wail. Here! there! No, behind—ahead!

He turned to the right—yes, from there!

He turned to the left—no, from there!

It seemed to come from everywhere, a long piteous cry. Yet it was the same voice.

Suddenly there was a laugh, a mocking laugh. It came from nowhere.

Remember that he was in a desolate region, with the tropical darkness around him. There was no sign of a created being, living or dead. And yet that wail, that laugh, rang in his ear.

His heart turned cold with fear; his blood froze in his veins.

Yes! inside the grotto, framed in the darkness was a Face! Half beast, half man. Low hanging jaws; reddish whiskers; dirty grey hair, bushy over the projecting forehead; blinking bloodshot eyes.

Over the head protruded long ears or horns; which he could not tell. There seemed to be a hump behind in the darkness, like a hunchback's. He caught a glimpse of the legs, crooked like a satyr's. The jaws opened, and there issued

forth the same mocking laugh. The being advanced, hobbling over the crooked legs.

It was the Grey Hyena.

He remembered the tales of his childhood, mothers' tales to frighten children. The cunning beast that first wailed like a child to allure its unwary victim, then tore it to pieces. The ingenuity of a fiend, perchance a human fiend!

He remembered the teachings of his faith; the souls of the accursed haunting the bodies of beasts in their re-incarnations; of their returning to earth to expiate the sins of their past lives.

He stood still, with his hand to his bosom where lay the small dagger he had received in his prison—too small, too material, for such a foe. But the hyena blinked, and in that there was a leer—a scornful leer.

"Hook-ka huah! . . . huah! huah! huah!" laughed the hyena.

It ambled out of the grotto, blinked and leered again, then with the same laugh disap-

peared down the ravine. Five minutes later he heard the wailing of a child in the stillness of the night.

With a panting heart he entered the grotto. It widened out beyond. Stooping at every step, holding aloft his torch, he came to a long dark gallery that seemed to lead into the bowels of the earth.

A cold, damp, musty smell arose in the air as he entered the tunnel. Lower and lower into the earth he went, but the dark roof lifted higher and higher, till the lurid glare failed to reach the gloom above. The parallel walls on either side seemed to recede from view. It was a black space of unknown dimensions around, above, beyond. Drip! drip! drip! fell from overhead the last surviving raindrops caught in the earth above.

Creepy, slimy, sluggish things crawled between his naked toes with chilling sloth. Suddenly he stumbled. It was a heap of bones—perhaps bestial, perhaps not. With a heavy step he lurched up—and crashed through a

thick skull, awakening a thousand hideous echoes.

As if aroused from a prolonged slumber, pale green eyes seemed to peer at him from every nook and corner. He felt a deep breathing in the place, other than his own. The place seemed all alive with beings that he could not see nor hear; only feel. With drunken steps he walked on and on into the enshrouding gloom.

Suddenly he heard a low rumbling sound, like distant thunder. It grew louder and louder, reverberating through the long tunnel, then ending in a dull thud.

"A boulder fallen outside; it seemed a chorus of unhuman laughter!" And he smiled a grim sickly smile.

An instantaneous gleam of light, reflected from the torch by some moving object, shot ahead, and then quickly vanished. A nestling, whirring sound above, and a dark cold mass rushed through the air and fell flat on his face. With a cry of horror he dropped the torch and

tore off the thing with his fingers. It was a huge bat, with large flapping wings.

A cold shudder ran through his frame. Snatching up the brand he hastened on. The sides of the cavern became visible again. He seemed to be entering a wide corridor hewn out of the solid rock. The ruddy glare revealed the faint outlines of two rows of gigantic pillars flickering drunkenly in the uncertain gloom.

Pillars and pillars and pillars. There seemed to be no end to them. At last they widened out into the central chamber. Above, the gloom was still impenetrable, but far ahead there appeared the head of the chamber in a dark hazy mist.

He drew nearer. Against the solid wall, and jutting out in bold relief, he made out a huge outline spread fan-shaped from a central body.

It was a colossal idol.

It sat upon a raised *musnud* chiselled in black marble, its feet coiled beneath the body. The arms lay upon each knee. The head was unseen in the gloom above.

Coming nearer he raised the torch aloft till the slanting rays fell upon the face. It was a grim, stern face—not like that of Brahma, or Vishnu, or Siva.

The monstrous ears spread out like fans on each side of the head; the broad, square jaws clenched tight in savage fury; the thick, flat nose hung heavy over the mouth. It was more fiend than man; less man than beast. He shuddered in vague terror as his restless eyes fell upon these features involuntarily. For it was not them that he sought.

From right in the centre of the forehead he saw a spark of light emanating with intermittent glow as he moved his torch. With quickening breath he saw that.

It was the eye of the god—the *manik*.

It scintillated rays of fire from its uncut corners even in that flickering light. Three human eyes placed together would have seemed small beside it. Yet it shone with the angry blaze of a human eye—a living eye.

Hark! what was that? A step—a laugh—a

low chuckle? Impossible surely, in the bosom of Mother Earth, and in that dread hour of night when even idols sleep!

He looked around with fearful eyes, like a criminal caught in his toils. He strained his ears to catch the echo of some advancing footstep, and clutched convulsively the dagger in his bosom.

Drip! drip! drip! Splash! . . .

Was it but the chuckling of the water falling from the earth above to the earth beneath? Surely, not a laugh?

All stillness again, save the beating of his heart. In intense relief he passed on, cursing his cowardice.

But scarcely a step had he taken when he recoiled in sudden terror. He saw a recumbent figure upon the sanctuary; another; yet another. All lying in a heap in strange unnatural attitudes.

Holding his breath, he peered at them, the cold sweat standing in beads upon his brow.

Then gradually he realised. They were dead!

Human skeletons. Mere bags of dust that would crumble at the lightest touch.

But in each of them he noticed something that he could not understand. From the head to the breast each skeleton was cloven in twain. Some fearful blow must have done that—perchance in the living flesh.

With a cold shiver he passed them by, and ascended the altar. He looked up to the gleaming stone upon the idol's brow. Now or never!

But what did he see there that made him start in sudden horror, his knees knocking together in convulsion, his bronzed face blanching to a leaden hue?

Right above his head, and held by an iron rod from the roof, was an enormous axe. Its huge blade, a yard across from horn to horn, lay on a line with the idol's brow.

As one awakening from a dream, the knowledge of its purpose began to dawn upon him. The moment the despoiler touched the eye of the god some secret spring would be released. The

iron rod that held the axe would swing back upon him. The axe would cleave him in twain.

Then he understood also the fearful import of those skeletons strewing the floor of the sanctuary. Unhappy wretches that had met a terrible death.

With a bound he sprang clear of the threatened space, stumbled headlong over the sanctuary, and lay crouching in the corner opposite.

And now the diminished torch flickered and sputtered in his hand till he cast it to the floor. There the red spark glowed awhile, then died away under a veil of ashes.

It was an impenetrable gloom. The idol, whose huge outline he had last seen by the dying embers, was now beyond his ken. He sat still, and the dull hours passed slowly by. He remembered his *guru's* warning words, and waited for Mother Kali to reveal her bounty.

He knew not that the hand of Death was close upon him.

His trials? What were they now? Kings

and rulers—what were they? It was Death that came to seek him against the will of kings.

He heard a strange sound, a low soft whistle, some distance away it seemed in that stillness. It came again, nearer. This time he thought it could not be a whistle; rather as the escape of wind from an iron nozzle. It came nearer still, sharper, harder. It died out a moment, then instantly resumed, but now in an intermittent flow.

He crouched upon his hands and knees, and peered into the gloom. He thought he saw something; felt sure he saw. It might have been a black mass, more imagined than seen, dark against the darker background.

Still nearer. It seemed to rise in the air—to rear up—a thick column three cubits high. The column approached, a long heavy body trailing behind it; *that* he guessed from the soft sweeping rustle it made. Some terrible being that man was impotent to face.

He lay flat on the ground, scarce daring to

breathe—then suddenly remembered in horror that half his own body lay straight in its path. For a moment he was stunned by the thought. On one side lay the sanctuary rails; he could recede no further. On the other was this fearful monster. His end was inevitable.

In that supreme crisis it was mere instinct that prompted him to act, the love of man for his life. He turned on his side, curved his legs inwards under him, an inch at a time lest the sound should betray him. He prayed for time —just the bare moments to curl himself by the rails.

Slowly the knees came up, too slow for such a peril. He felt a breath upon his face. The strange intermittent sound had risen to a steady flow. The cold, clammy wind enshrouded him like a blast from a grave. The Thing was upon him—a dark mass looming over him!

O *Bhugwan*, grant one single moment—one single span to recede in silence! One little span for a human life. . . . Too late, too late!

In frantic haste he clashed his knees to his

chin, then shivered in terror. A soft clatter he heard by his side, and knew that he was betrayed. In that last movement the dagger had fallen from his bosom.

Swerving swiftly at the sound, the Thing came down—upon his knees. A chilling body rolled over them, grinding them down by its sheer weight. He marvelled that he did not shriek out in horror. Perhaps he did. In that agonising moment he was not conscious of his deeds. Perhaps a merciful torpor had come upon him to spare this pain.

But suddenly the Thing had stopped in its course. He felt that something was now creeping *under* him; how, he was too deadened with pain to know. Slowly, yet forcibly, his legs were pulled out from beneath him. Something seemed to be above them, under them, all around them. Something seemed to be crushing them on every side.

And slowly the pressure began to mount up; upwards from the knees, the thighs, the waist. He was lifted up like a child by some irresistible

force, and a new band cast around him higher and higher.

In stooping to the floor at the first sense of danger, his arms had lain doubled up against his breast. As the first coil touched his elbow, he realised with a shock that now his destruction was nearing its completion. Even as a man striking out in a nightmare, he awoke from his stupor.

With a stifled groan he threw out his arms wildly—refusing to die without a struggle. A cold curling mass met his hands. He hit at it blindly—thrust it from him—clutched it in a frenzied grasp with both hands.

A blast of fire smote his face that instant, just from the end of his arms. A sound as that of rushing waters issued therefrom, an arm's length away. Then he realised that the Thing that held him in its grip—and he it—was a gigantic boa.

Then also he realised as he lay upon his side, that soon his legs, his whole body, would be paralysed under that stupendous pressure—then

crushed into soft clay. Knowing this, he clenched his fingers upon the serpent's throat with the grip of death—just to get the dearest price for his precious life.

He knew he must die. What else he knew, mattered little. In that moment of agony all knowledge flashed through his mind in a vision. What this serpent was, according to the teachings of his faith, and what vengeance it was wrecking upon him, the world would never know; the king would never know. Kings and rulers? What mattered they now? He that sent him to this death, what cared he for one human life? Not death alone, but this cruel torture—who would ever know, or care? *She* perchance——.

The spell was broken. The spell that had cast its shroud over his senses at the moment of death was broken. From the thought of *her* came the thought of her gift—the dagger! It lay upon the floor before his breast; he had heard it clatter there when the serpent had swept past it in its last coil.

The spirit of the Serpent-Queen, its new

incarnation, was grinding his bones to dust—even as in his mystic trance he had foretold.

"What talisman to save thee from her coils?"

"*None—but that of Love!*"

Ay, none—save his beloved's parting gift!

Alas! he could not reach it without releasing one hand from the monster's throat; the other alone would scarce keep it away. Already his arms were aching from that rigid thrust, and quivering all along their length in a ceaseless tremor. And yet he must gain the dagger for that very reason. Soon it would be too late. Oh, if his limbs were free! He could then have thrust a foot against the serpent's neck, and released one hand.

In the frenzy of madness he racked his brains. Some plan, some scheme, to reach the dagger!

Then like a glimmering hope the thought came to him. Even in that position he could at least *roll* upon the floor; his elbows were free. One turn of the body sideways would bring his

hands within reach of the sanctuary rails! He remembered that; for sight was denied him.

Clenching his teeth, and taking a deep long breath, he thrust out in one last stupendous effort. Curling his fingers, he found an iron bar. Slowly he drew the serpent's neck towards it, thrust it behind, released the right hand an instant—and seized the dagger.

A soft rending sound, a thud—and the blade was buried up to the hilt in the serpent's throat, again and again.

A savage hiss—a swish—a grinding, racking pain down his waist, his limbs—a spasmodic beat and beat from the serpent's tail upon his legs—and the massive coils slowly relaxed from their terrible tension.

Panting, gasping, his eyes swimming in a mist, he staggered up from the writhing heap, then fell down in a swoon.

How long he lay there he could not tell. He awoke with a start. But for the cold, lifeless coils against his feet that deadly struggle in

the dark might have seemed a horrible nightmare. His eyes fell upon the gloom around, and gradually it began to dawn upon him that his task was not yet over. Even that agonising conflict had been but a prelude. His trial yet remained.

In vague, uncertain purpose he arose to his feet, then stood rooted to the spot.

What was that he saw? Right ahead against the solid darkness a faint light glimmering, a single ray; then another by its side. Suddenly the two leapt downwards in converging pencils, till they met in one broad band and shot away towards the dark corridor.

Bewildered, a thousand emotions rending his heart, he gazed upwards.

They were from the nostrils of the idol!

What divine manifestation was this—what infernal mechanism, rather?

With hands pressed tight to his throbbing brow he thought. Then his eyes fell upon the particles of dust, disturbed from their long rest by his intrusion, shining in the beam of light.

The light was real, material! Not a phantom light.

Like an inspiration came back to him his *guru's* words, "*The third night from the full moon.*"

It *was* the moonlight. It shone through some well-devised gallery in the earth above, and then peered down through the idol's nostrils. That could happen only when the moon was at a particular point in the heavens; a particular night, a particular hour. This was the fateful moment.

But what meant the light? What did it portend?

"*Where falls the light . . .*"

He remembered these words—the dying words of the builder of that temple. With quickened breath he followed the light—from the nostrils, across the sanctuary, along the steps, into the vast corridor. Lower and lower it bent, bathing his head, his breast, his knees . . . it halted upon a flagstone!

Then his panting heart stayed its beat. The

flagstone, a cubit square, was nowise different from its neighbours. He examined its surface, but found no mark, no inscription upon it. He peered into the lining of mortar around, but that was hard and level like the rest. And all the while the moonlight was moving across its face. Soon it would be shut off, and he would have lost his chance for ever.

In frenzied haste he stuck his dagger into the lining, and ripped open the mortar all around. About that flagstone lay his salvation. It was not above. It might be beneath.

Plunging the blade between, he tugged and strained till he felt the stone move. With one exhausting effort he thrust the dagger beneath, and lifted the slab.

His hungry hands groped in the hollow. With a stifled cry he felt the touch of cold metal. It was an iron ring.

One frantic pull—a sudden snap as of a bursting cord—a spark of light at the foot of the idol, and a heavy clang of steel against stone rang through the vast temple.

The axe had fallen.

And now with crouching gait he ascended the idol. Hand over hand, and foot upon the ladder of arms, he mounted. A momentary hesitation, one last struggle of superstition against revelation, and the point of the dagger reached the glittering gem.

A sudden pause whilst the heart beat a dozen times—and the precious *manik* was gouged out of the idol's eye.

A distant rumbling—the idol moved—rocked upon its seat. The vast unseen roof creaked and groaned; the whole temple swayed and shook like a shell upon the sea.

A loud chuckle—the pitter-patter-pitter of invisible feet—a swishing and a rushing sound, as of living bodies hurled through the air—and the terror-stricken youth leapt down with a gasp and fled into the darkness.

Cold, clammy hands swept past his head. Dank, musty breaths fanned his face. Large lumbering bodies, soft to the touch, skimmed his hands. Hard, shell-clad objects rolled and

crushed over his feet. All along the corridors, along the galleries, along the tunnel.

Bruised and bleeding, he reached at last the earth above. Stumbling at every step, he fled over the gorge into the ravine, into the gully, into the ancient pathway, and fell panting upon the level ground. But with a stifled cry he rose again. Cold terror sat upon his brow, and chased him over the earth.

What has he seen or heard or felt?

The pale moonlight fell upon him, around him, and far over the fields and jungles. But, ye gods! what sight was this?

A herd of wild buffaloes, bursting through the thicket, come bellowing like thunder, trampling the earth, nostrils breathing fire, tails in the air. Wild boars and antelopes, mountain goats and jackals, black vultures with flapping wings, screeching through the air, and serpents and toads and frogs creeping and hopping on the earth. A raging wolf ran out, and a bleating sheep ran by its side. A frantic elephant came thundering onwards, and a wild-

cat sat upon its head. A snarl, a growl—a yellow-bellied tiger leapt forth and ran pursued by a deer!

They fled helter-skelter, stumbling and falling, and rising again. Now the field narrowed to a nullah, with thicket on either flank—and, tiger and antelope, wolf and sheep, serpent and toad, fled side by side and hustled one another in that stupendous race. Hunger, instinct, ferocity, all was forgotten. They shivered and cowered and ran all together.

For that which pursued them in that common flight and held them in its grip like the hand of death, was Fear.

A terrific shock, and the earth trembled as if in collision with a large planet. An awful sound like the fall of the heavens—and man and beast lay prone upon the ground.

It was the parting asunder of Mother Earth.

Dazed and wild-eyed, the youth arose and gazed behind through the cloud of dust dancing in the pale moonbeams. The gigantic eminence, beneath which had lain for countless ages

the subterraneous Temple of the *Manik*, was now flat with the ground.

Verily, the earthquake had done its work. The secret the Temple had held locked up in its bowels for centuries of years and cycles of centuries had been yielded up at last at the decree of Fate. Well might the Temple fall.

And the youth, hugging the precious gem to his breast, went forth into the night with a bursting heart.

Descending the plateau, he gazed bewildered before him. The hillside opposite, in which he had lain hidden the night before, had now vanished from human sight. Likewise the stream beneath had been wiped off the face of the earth. Dimly, vaguely he took in the significance of that stupendous cataclysm: realised that the overhanging cliff had indeed fallen, and filled up the stream.

With awe and fear in his heart and the vision of Omnipotent might in his eyes he ran swiftly over the fallen mass, down the declivity, up the stony gorge at last beyond which lay the plains.

With panting breath he climbed up, reached the narrow opening—then with a last despairing cry, a piteous moan, struggled onwards with his ebbing strength, reeled, staggered, fell prone upon his face. For in the very moment of safety, cruel pitiless Fate had struck him down.

At the mouth of the gorge a row of levelled lances awaited him.

Then in that agonising moment merciful oblivion came to him. He lay upon the ground before the lances, a senseless mass of poor bleeding humanity that had been sorely tried, had struggled bravely through countless perils, then in the moment of victory that had cost him his last ebbing strength had been struck cruelly down by mocking Fate. His destiny *was* fulfilled: that was his last conscious thought ere the oblivion enshrouded him in its pall. . . .

But, merciful *Bhugwan*, what marvel was this?

The lances did not descend upon him and transfix him. Instead, a hand was stretched forth, another, and he was lifted up tenderly, silently.

"Close the gorge!" It was a hurried whisper, a deep guttural voice that gave the command.

And at Rama Krishna's word the guards piled up the boulders they had already collected against the mouth of the gorge. . . .

Suddenly a distant rumbling, louder, louder—a might roar.

"Back! Back all—on either side!" Rama Krishna shouted above the din.

The guards ran back from the gorge into the shelter of the forest. Simple-minded warriors, they knew not that the terrible cataclysm was not yet over.

The torrent came down with a roar of thunder, gathering force at the narrow declivity. When the overhanging cliff had fallen into the stream in the earthquake, it had but diverted the channel. Rama Krishna knew that soon the piled-up water on the upper side would overtop the barrier—then rush down in an irresistible flood, sweeping all things before it.

A sudden shock—a piercing shriek, a human shriek, far down the declivity, another, yet

another—and the wall of water hungrily devoured its fleeing prey—reached the gorge, cast up a column of spray thirty cubits above the boulders.

The spray subsided, and a while after the sound of moving waters died out. All was still. The guards crept to the mouth of the gorge and peered over the boulders.

Ten cubits beneath them the declivity was now a sluggish molten lake. Seven fathoms below its surface lay hid the evidence of the swift retribution it had wreaked upon the fleeing Thugs.

"Come away," the guards said, one to another. "The brethern are avenged."

They turned to their charge. For Narayan Lal was still their—prisoner!

Ten days after, a haggard and emaciated form, with hands and feet cut open in a hundred wounds, a madman's haunted look in his sunken eyes, and raving, delirious words upon his lips, was brought back by the guards to the palace.

"The *manik*, O King!"

With these words Narayan Lal delivered up his trust, and fell down in a swoon at his master's feet.

. . . . .

"Of a truth, high was the destiny of this man," the Great King murmured. "Verily, such perils could be sent to him alone for whom much reward was in store." He mused awhile, thinking of the perils of his own youth on the field of battle; and thus thinking, gathered hope for the days yet to come.

"But tell me this, O man of learning: Why was Narayan Lal made to undergo so many trials? Surely *Parameshwar* could give his verdict once for all?"

The Story-teller marvelled at so great a wisdom.

"True, O Heaven-born; but it is as easy for *Parameshwar* to manifest his will six times in succession as once—or sixty times six times. In an ordeal dependent upon divine judgment, we mortals may make any stipulation we choose. If *Parameshwar* accepts the terms, he will fulfil

them in their entirety. So, if five times Narayan Lal escaped, but at the sixth succumbed, then indeed would the verdict of the Deity have been against him from the beginning. The race is at the finish, not at the start."

"But tell me, what was the design of *Parameshwar* in sending the earthquake?"

"To aid him; and yet to try him. Earthquakes and landslips are not unknown in the lower altitudes of the Himalayas. And perchance the heavy rainfall, and then the mechanical forces that caused the fall of the axe, might have set into action the initial movement. Great results often have small causes; even a flickering spark will set a whole forest ablaze, and a tiny hole in a dyke that a child's small hand might stop will turn a sea-girt lowland into a raging gulf.

"As regards the serpent, such a creature may sometimes be found lurking in ancient ruins. But, O Heaven-born, the re-incarnation of the original serpent that carried the *manik* upon its head—would it not be there on such an occasion

when the first hand came to despoil it that was *not* guilty of the basest ingratitude? Would it not be there to test if verily Narayan Lal would escape death by divine aid because of his innocence? For it was indeed Narayan Lal's fate that he should suffer peril upon peril, and a thousand unseen perils.

"Thus in his next trial," continued the Story-teller, "but for an unknown friend he had died a cruel death. True, it was his fate to have that friend; nevertheless he had cause to thank the gods for so great a love."

Chapter Nine

THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

FOR three days and three nights Narayan Lal lay in the swoon of death, with but intermittent flashes of consciousness. The stupendous ordeal he had gone through in the search for the precious *manik* had left its impress upon him for ever. Thrice he had started from his bed with a cry of terror, flinging off the blankets from his limbs.

"The serpent! The serpent! Can ye not see it? It is enfolding my limbs in its coils, grinding my bones to dust! Its fangs are at my throat—keep it back, keep it back!" . . . Thus in his delirium he fought anew that terrible battle with the boa-constrictor in the subterraneous temple. The prison guards gave him such rough comfort as they might, but it scarce

sufficed to cure him of such sickness of both mind and body.

Then on the third night the Princess Devala said to her handmaid, "Leila, dost thou love me? Then lend me thy garments."

But Leila, understanding her purpose, shook her head sadly. "Wouldst thou go to him in disguise, Heaven-born, to nurse him back to life? But what avail? Remember he has yet two more trials—and a time may come when *thou alone canst save him from certain death!* Reserve thine own effort for that supreme crisis."

"But why not now as well as then?"

"Because if thou goest to him now and thy disguise be detected, as well it might, thou shalt have lost all chance of going to him in the greater need. For then thou shalt be so well guarded—awaiting the end, thine and his—that even I could not serve thee."

"But is not this the supreme crisis?" the princess asked again, resolved in her inmost heart that in the hour of need she would fling away her all for her lover's sake.

"A little while, yet a little while—and the hour of darkness will be at hand, when none but thou mayest save him!" For gifted, like some maidens, with a vision of the future, Leila vaguely felt a presentiment in her heart that, great as Narayan Lal's perils had been so far, at the culminating ordeal when man and beast and devil would be let loose against him, either he must sink in the strife or the Supreme *Parameshwar* would declare His verdict by the hand of the very woman for the love of whom Narayan Lal was undergoing these perils.

"Meanwhile hope, watch and pray," she said to the princess. "And fear not for the present. Even now the *guru* and his brethren are tending him. For they have obtained leave to nurse him and minister to him—till the next trial."

Thus when Narayan Lal had regained his health and strength, his master bade him appear before him for the fifth ordeal. And this the king did on the very morning of the trial, without any previous warning—so that the *guru*

and his brethren had to take a hurried farewell.

But the night before a strange scene had been enacted in the palace courtyard. Going with her silver pitcher to the inner fountain, Leila saw the self-same mendicant that once before had begged alms from the palace guards.

A vague presentiment seized her heart. She called in the mendicant to the fountain and gave him of her bounty. The old man, stooping down to give her his blessing, whispered into her ear:

"*Within the king's packets lies death.* The alchemist who made them up is a friend, but must needs obey the royal command. Thus all night must I seek the antidote; but at my return it may be too late! Say, hast thou a lover amongst the guards?"

"But he may be impotent!" she murmured softly. "His very duty may keep him away——"

"Then the lover of a friend of thine whose

duty might take him to the trial? Answer quickly!"

A vague light crept into Leila's mind. She must find two friends in the palace: Harnam Das, if a man of position were needed; and another for humbler duties. In frantic haste she racked her brains. There was indeed a serving-maid of the palace, deeply attached to the princess and betrothed to one of the attendants; their marriage had long been deferred for the want of a dower. Then Leila inwardly vowed that out of her own dower would the deficiency be made good. All this passed through her mind in a flash of inspiration.

"Enough! The *guru* will do the rest; I but obey him in seeking the antidote. Yet the trial may have already begun when I return; thus prepare thy friend's lover for *his* task." Saying this, the mendicant vanished in the dark.

Inside, in a corridor, the Jemadar of the Palace, the Thug in disguise, was waiting for Leila, seeking to waylay her. Since his friends had perished in the ravine in Narayan Lal's

fourth trial, he knew that he must carry out his evil deeds *within* the palace. Before the end of the trials Narayan Lal must die; else his own life would be forfeited; the secret spies of his master would see to that. Thus if Narayan Lal were not killed in the trials, if instead he triumphed over them all, then must he slay the youth in the very moment of triumph, or perish himself; for afterwards it would be too late.

Thus his first endeavour was that the youth should die in the trials; that would spare him his own peril. And somehow the false jemadar seemed to realise that he must silence Leila for ever to gain that end. He awaited her coming in the corridor, his hand upon the dagger in his girdle. If she shrieked, he would silence her then and there. But if possible, he would carry her away noislessly, as once before he had nearly done—fulfil his other nameless purpose upon her, then slay her and cast her body into the ravine beyond the palace wall. . . .

Suddenly Leila paused. At the beginning of the dark corridor she dreaded there was a short

side passage leading into an alcove. Here behind a curtain she paused to take breath. Young as she was, the hidden perils of the palace had taught her wisdom—and stratagems.

A while after a maiden's veiled form, with a pitcher balanced upon her head, seemed to be dimly visible at the beginning of the side passage, nearest the corridor. It seemed to hesitate a moment, before plunging into the corridor.

A stealthy sound was heard—less a muffled foot step than a hard breathing. Nearer and nearer came the sound—from pillar to pillar. With a sudden swoop the jemadar fell upon his prey—flung his arms around the veiled form. Down came the pitcher with a crash and lay broken in a thousand fragments; for it was an earthern pitcher. That instant another form whisked past him, holding a silver pitcher in her hands, not upon her head. With a muttered curse the jemadar turned to her. But already Leila was far down the corridor.

And the veiled form, that had borne the

empty earthen pitcher upon its head and whom the jemadar had embraced? It suddenly threw off the veil, and held him tight in its grasp! One fierce struggle, and the two were upon the floor, Harnam Das on top. Then a quick turn of the wrist, and the jemadar was uppermost. Releasing one hand he sought for something at his girdle. But clutching his antagonist's head with both arms, Harnam gave a sudden twist and rolled over on his side, bringing down his foe before him. Thus in grim silence they wrestled; for each felt that this was a private matter, and the world must not know of it. Each saw nothing of the other, and knew not of his identity; but each felt instinctively that, if so permitted, the fight must be to the death.

But it was not so permitted. The sound of hurried fotsteps, and a crowd of eunuchs burst from the inner palace. Even as Leila had reached the door, set down the pitcher, and was about to turn single-handed to her lover's aid, the eunuchs heard the scuffle through the open

door. They ran down the corridor with drawn tulwars—but found nothing!

With common instinct the combatants had parted, and had fled different ways into the darkness! . . .

Thus in the subsequent commotion and talk among the attendants of the palace on this night before Narayan Lal's fifth ordeal, it did not seem strange that an affrighted serving-maid of the palace should confer with her betrothed and seek his protection in going about her duties.

The day of the trial came, and Narayan Lal was taken before his master. The scene was once more the audience-hall of the palace. Narayan Lal was taken there in his bare clothes —white trousers, white tunic, and white turban. The councillors sat once more before the throne, leaving a space for the juggler twelve cubits in diameter.

At a sign from the king an attendant approached with a long piece of leather three fingers thick, and cut off with his sword a por-

tion that reached from his waist to his feet. He came and placed it on the floor midway between Narayan Lal and the throne, and on a line with them. There it lay inert and motionless—a piece of leather. All wondered why it lay there.

"Roll up thy sleeves," bade the king.

Without a word Narayan Lal obeyed, and stood with arms bared to the elbow.

"That is thy subject," said the king, pointing to the rigid black line. "Breathe life into it before my eyes, so that it may live and move."

Narayan Lal seemed lost for a while in deep thought, his eyes closed, his lips half open. Then a faint smile broke upon them as he realised the nature of the task he was bidden to perform.

He knelt down before the line, resting upon his heels, and stretched forth his right hand till the fingers just closed over the end of the leather. Gently he began to wriggle it upon the floor, the undulating motion passing along the leather from end to end. His left arm was bent round over his back in the manner of a

fencer. Perhaps he did that to indicate that the left hand would be no confederate of the right.

Gradually he accelerated the motion, working with his wrist alone. The curves began to increase in width, and the further end to come nearer.

Soon the vibration became so rapid that the coils seemed to telescope into one another. Suddenly he thrust forward the whole arm, while still maintaining the lateral motion. The free end shot out and licked the foot of the daïs —then was drawn back as rapidly.

Faster and faster grew the pace. It became a haze of sweeping curves. Once he raised the left hand from his back, and rapidly circled it over the wriggling mass—then seeming to repent of his forgetfulness, drew it back hastily to its resting-place. The wise ones among the spectators shook their heads at that, and smiled knowingly. A cross-eyed sage plucked at his neighbour's sleeve and silently pointed to the head of the mass. The other dropped his spec-

tacles upon his nose and peered over them curiously.

"The end is in the air," he muttered, gravely re-adjusting his glases.

The end of the coil was no longer upon the floor; it was a span above it. Perhaps the rapidity of the motion had given it some species of centrifugal force.

The grey-haired councillors around heard the words, and, casting gravity to the winds, craned their necks like excited schoolboys.

"A thick wire at the end of the leather, to give it that support," exclaimed one in a moment of inspiration. "It must have been caught up from the floor."

"Too thick for a wire," objected another; "it is even thicker than the leather."

"That is only a deception of the eye," maintained the sage, when someone on the other side of the daïs gave a loud gasp.

"It is expanding! It is as broad as a child's hand."

"A woman's rather," corrected another.

"A man's!" cried out a heavy old warrior, clutching at his huge whiskers that lay twisted over his ears.

Truly, the end of the leather was like a man's hand, the fingers bent slightly inwards; it was just visible over the haze. That instant the middle finger seemed to lengthen out, a full inch beyond the others.

"And it *is* a wire at the end of it," murmured the man of wisdom. "Only it seems very thin now."

His neighbour protested that there was no wire. Then hastily he admitted there was—not one, but two. A moment later he denied there was any. Then, again, he ate his words, and confessed there was.

Two tiny wires seemed to emerge from the tip of that middle finger. They quivered the tenth of a second in the air, then were withdrawn. Again they darted out, and as quickly vanished. Like miniature forked lightning they vibrated to and fro.

Suddenly Narayan Lal leapt to his feet, lift-

ing the mass of curves still wriggling in the air, flicked it violently, then dashed it to the floor—a supple line of black flesh, thick as a man's hand at the other end.

Slowly the head begin to rise, higher and higher, slowly the tail began to coil inwards, round and round. The black wires began to dart anew, in and out. Two shining points of light burst forth on the broad head behind the wires.

It was a living serpent. Awhile it stood erect, seeking a prey.

"*Maro! Maro!* (Kill! Kill!)" broke out a babel of voices. The huddled heap of undignified councillors fell back towards the walls in sudden haste.

But with a swift stride Narayan Lal caught up the serpent in his right hand by the tail. In an instant the head curled round with an angry hiss. An arm's length from his hand it oscillated just once back to take sure aim upon it, then launched out for the fatal blow.

But quicker than lightning Narayan Lal's

"NARAYAN LAL CAUGHT UP THE SERPENT IN HIS RIGHT HAND BY THE TAIL"

left hand closed over the right—slid along the serpent's body, tightening the fingers as it went —and gripped the baffled creature by the neck. He pressed the thumb upon the throat, forcing the serpent to open wide its mouth.

"Behold the poison fangs, O King!" Two pairs of white ivory gleamed within, one on either side. Each fang was no bigger than a grain of rice; yet one single scratch from it upon the juggler's arm would have turned him into a blackened corpse.

"A sword and a flute!" he gasped between his pursed lips, his wrist shaking violently from the desperate struggles of the serpent to escape. They were brought after a seeming age and placed by his side—the sword, a long narrow blade.

Narayan Lal bent down over the floor and thrust the serpent's tail under his right foot. He seized the flute with his right hand that was now free, and began a weird chant upon it—stretching forth his left hand that still held the serpent by the neck, as far as it could reach.

Suddenly, with a furious climax upon the flute, he sprang back from the floor, releasing that instant his left hand from the serpent's neck. Ere the dazed creature could resolve to strike, he stepped back four cubits from it and began a soft soothing melody—like distant music across still waters.

For a while the serpent hesitated. Anger and joy battled in its glistening eyes. It raised its head, poised it a moment in the air, arched its back, recoiled to take aim—then relapsed into a suppliant column, bowing humbly to the music.

The music changed. Narayan Lal glided into a lullaby, low and gentle. In response the serpent waved its head from side to side in graceful motion. Softer and softer came the music, and gentler and gentler bowed the serpent's hood. The music seemed to die away in a muffled echo, and the serpent held its length erect in the air as if lulled to sleep in that upright attitude.

Again the tune was changed. It was now

the quick-pulsing beat and broad rhythm of "*Taza bi taza,*" the most famous melody of the land. In a moment the delighted creature awoke from its dream, puffed out its hood to the utmost, and swayed its entire length in harmony. But yet the time grew faster. The oscillating coil swept out in pride and pleasure and joy, the tail beating upon the floor in unison.

The music burst forth into a rhapsody, wild, fierce, interwoven with passion and pain. Narayan Lal strode across the arena, stamping at each furious blast. The serpent leapt to the strains in frantic motion, hissed and struck out at imaginary foes, circled round the juggler, and followed him about like a trailing shadow. Thus did Narayan Lal beguile it, and work it up to the frenzy of madness.

Suddenly the flute rang out in a shrill screech; a series of discordant notes burst out in a loud crescendo, then stopped dead short.

The serpent winced and writhed in pain, as if struck by a whip. With an angry hiss it

launched forth from the unfolding coil, straight at Narayan Lal.

But an instant quicker he had seized the sword with his right hand, the left still clutching the flute. Whilst yet the approaching line was a yard from his breast the glittering blade passed clean through it. The head sprang from the blow; Narayan Lal raised the flute before him; the severed head of the serpent fell upon the bulb of the flute, the open jaws closing upon it in that dying grip.

The body relapsed upon the floor, quivered and writhed, and marked its passage along it with a broad red band—then lay still. Narayan Lal stepped to the daïs, lifted up the flute, and pointed to the crimson drops issuing from the severed head.

"Behold, O Heaven-born, this living flesh!"

"*Shabash*, Narayan! *Shabash!*" a cheer passed from lip to lip, swelling to a wild shout in the courtyard beyond. But even in that moment of exultation the voice of the king hushed them all.

Chapter Ten

THE POISONED CUP

ERE the applause had died away, and in the very midst of his triumph, the king turned to the juggler.

"Thou hast given life where there was no life; that was well. Now give life to thyself—after I have taken it from thee for an hour's space."

Narayan Lal caught his breath as he heard these words. He marked the signal that brought forth two men from a doorway beside the throne. What danger threatened him he knew not; the nature of this trial was beyond his anticipation.

He marked the two men well; his instinct led him to gather quickly whatever clue he could. The first was middle-aged; he was unknown to him. The other, a young man, he recognised

as one of the attendants of the palace. They bore trays in their hands, that of the first containing three silver goblets, that of the other two pieces of conch shell, and two little packages of cloth. They knelt before the king, who broke with his own hands the seal upon each package. The seal was that of his signet-ring.

Two of the goblets were empty; the third, double the size of the others, was full of water. Setting the tray down, the first attendant retired. Narayan Lal instinctively noted that the second attendant, the young man, lagged somewhat behind. He laid down the tray, and opened one of the packages—a piece of cloth a quarter of a handkerchief in size. It contained a white powder.

"Diamond-dust," spoke the king from the throne. "One shellful of it will be mixed with water. That thou must drink."

But diamond-dust was a deadly poison. One shellful would kill three big men.

The attendant opened the other package. It contained a dark brown powder.

"*Datura,*" said the king calmly. "One shellful of it will be mixed with water. That thou must drink likewise."

And likewise *datura* was a deadly poison. One shellful would kill three strong horses. In either case Narayan Lal would die an agonising death. He realised that without the royal word. He saw darkness before him. There was no escape this time.

Yet from his infancy had he been trained to struggle to the bitter end. And if he refused the feat, he would forthwith be adjudged guilty. That, surely, was certain death.

The king noted his hesitation. He smiled grimly, and waved his hand. A curtain was flung aside at the further end of the hall, revealing the outer courtyard. A huge elephant, a fine tusker eight cubits (twelve feet) high, came into view. Guided by the mahout, it paused before a block of wood a cubit high.

For the elephant was the high executioner of the kingdom. The criminal, found guilty of high treason, would be made to kneel before the

block, and place his head upon it. The elephant would lay its foot upon the head, and press with its whole weight upon it. The next instant the traitor's head would be flat with the wood.

"Choose between the elephant and the poisons," bade the king, in a level voice; for to him Narayan Lal still seemed to be a traitor.

In calm acquiescence the youth bowed his head; he would choose the poisons; if need be, would die fighting to the last in silent protestation of his innocence. If he failed—well, he could die but once. And the princess? Surely merciful *Parameshwar* would grant her a happy release simultaneously with his own. For he remembered that she had at her bosom a true and unerring friend that would release her from all pain.

These thoughts passed through his mind whilst yet the attendant was measuring out the poisons. Suddenly, in the very deed, the menial raised the shell before him as if to see that it were brimful. That instant Narayan Lal

caught a strange gleam in his eye. It was just a momentary glance, but full of a hidden fire. A mute appeal, passionate, fearful.

As he lowered the shell into a goblet, the glance travelled down from Narayan's face and lingered the fraction of a second at the edge of the tray.

Peeping from beneath it Narayan observed the fringe of a cloth, no wider than a wisp of straw; that alone was visible. In a flash of inspiration he realised. It was a third package. The attendant had held it in his fingers under cover of the tray.

A thousand emotions rending his heart, the juggler tortured his mind to guess what this could mean. Some unknown friend had sent it to him; instinct and the memory of his love told him that. But how it could save him, he knew not yet. For a moment he thought that perchance he could substitute its contents for the poisons. But with a sinking heart he saw the attendant fill each goblet of poison with water. To dispose of them secretly now was impossible;

he had no means of concealing two goblets of fluid. One hope remained; the package itself might suggest a method.

As the attendant withdrew, Narayan seized the tray with both hands, as if to draw it closer to him. The right hand covered the edge where the hidden package lay; the left found its grip near one of the empty cloths upon it.

Whilst moving the tray to his feet he drew in the package with the little finger of the right hand, and slipped it to the hollow of the palm. With the left hand he picked up the empty cloth and transferred it to the right—as if intending to wipe the goblets with it.

The right hand now held two similar pieces of cloth; one empty, the other that from an unknown friend. But the spectators knew only of the former.

With the little finger, curved beneath, he felt that the package was loose. It contained something soft; perhaps another powder. To transfer the contents from one cloth to the other—whilst ostensibly smoothing down the

creases of the latter—was not a difficult task to him.

Hiding the cloth now containing the powder in the hollow of the hand, he proceeded to wipe a goblet with the other. The world thought it was the same one as before. The world was wrong.

With a catch in his breath he manipulated this cloth, his hungry eyes searching for some hidden clue. First one corner, then another he used to wipe the sides, the rim, the stem of the goblet.

"*This first.*" His swimming eyes read these words faintly traced upon it. He felt the earth reel beneath him. The writing was that of his *guru.*

He remembered the *guru's* skill in poisons and antidotes. And like a flash of lightning the remembrance came to him that the young attendant, who had secretly given him the package, was betrothed to a handmaid of the palace; that the handmaid was devoted to her mistress, the Princess Devala.

With a beating heart he raised the goblet of diamond-dust to his lips. The right hand he held beneath it, as if to wipe his mouth with the cloth. But the cloth had changed places once more with the other in the same palm; the one containing the powder was now foremost.

Like trickling sand the hidden powder fell into his mouth. The liquid ran down in a torrent after it. With a choking gulp he drank it to the dregs, and cast the goblet aside.

Whether the antidote would act he could scarcely tell; he earnestly prayed that it would. His life was upon the knees of the gods. His loved ones were risking theirs for his. If die he must, he would die keeping their trust.

He bent his head upon his knees, his hands clutched to his breast. With one wild jerk he threw up his hands to seize the other goblet. But now one cloth was in his hand; the one containing the message lay hid in his bosom.

He poured the fluid down his throat, his lips twitching at each gulp. To the last drop he

drank; with a clatter the goblet fell at his feet. His eyes were blazing now; then suddenly they dimmed. Without a word he laid himself down flat on his back, his head pillowed upon his hands.

Thus he lay awhile with closed eyes. The breath grew harder, sharper; the chest heaved spasmodically. Twice he made to cough, and twice the sound died away in a gurgle. He became restless. He turned his head upon the right shoulder, but found no comfort there. He turned it to the left, and found no comfort there.

His feet moved; they came together, but again separated. His toes curved inwards into the soles; his hands slid from beneath his head, jerked round to his sides, opened and closed, and clawed frantically at the air. He was seized with cramps.

A quiver ran through his frame from head to foot. Suddenly he turned on his side, drew up his legs, and curled down his head; his chin lay almost upon his knees. A moment later he

shot out his legs, returned to his back, and beat the air with his hands.

"This is cruelty, not justice," muttered someone beneath his breath. A while later, a wizened old councillor gasped out, pointing with his finger:

"He is dying!"

A murmur broke upon their lips. They saw the signs of hastening death, a trembling of the limbs from the knees downwards, and beads of sweat upon the brow.

Gradually the trembling ceased. One faint beat—another—then all was still.

"He is dead!"

And a strange silence came upon them all, for they felt dumbly that this was no time to speak. They glanced piteously upon the still body, and thanked the gods that this was no work of theirs.

Then a sudden cry loosened their tongues.

"But see, see! The sweat!"

Truly, the beads were running down the brow and cheeks.

"He still lives!"

They clutched at the hope, and the revulsion carried them far.

"The fever is breaking!"

"He may live yet!"

"He breathes! He moves!"

Then, without a word, like a dead man returning to life, Nayaran Lal sat up. With a choking cry he leapt to his feet, seized the tray and goblets, and stood before the daïs. Drawing a long breath, he bent his head and blew upon the tray—finishing in a sudden gasp that seemed to empty his heart.

"Behold thy poison, O Merciful King!"

He held aloft the tray. In one goblet was a white powder; dry.

It was the diamond-dust.

He blew anew, and held up the tray.

"Behold thy poison, O Light of Justice!"

In the other goblet was a brown powder; dry. It was the *datura*.

"See that they be full measure, O Seat of Wisdom!"

He took a shell, and poured the diamond-dust into it. It was filled to the brim. He emptied the shell, and did likewise with the second poison.

"See that they kill, O Mighty King!"

He pointed to the two covered cages that hung from the roof, one on either side of the throne. The first contained a *myna*, the second a *hiralal*, both of the most exquisite plumage and both favourites of the king.

But the king descended from his throne, and walked to the courtyard outside. Around the outer wall was a row of trees, and upon the trees many crows.

"Try them," said the king.

They fetched Narayan a small guava. Cutting it in halves, he dipped one half in the diamond-dust so that a tenth of it remained upon it, and cast it under a tree. The other half he dipped in the *datura*, and cast it under another tree.

A dozen crows came down, fighting for the booty. The winners seized the plunder, flew

back to the trees, and ate the guava. Five minutes after, fluttering their wings, they dropped to the ground, fluttered again—then lay still.

"Is it well, my Master?" asked Narayan Lal.

And the king answered: "It is well."

He turned to the mahout who still sat upon the elephant. "Take away the beast. There is no traitor found to-day. The treason shall be proved at the next trial!"

He little realised in what wondrous manner his words were destined to be fulfilled to the very letter at Narayan Lal's next and last trial!

. . . . .

"And how thinkest thou the poisons spared the life of Narayan Lal," asked the Great King of the Story-teller, "and how blew he them back out of his mouth, dry and separated from the water?"

And the Story-teller bowed his head, and murmured that it was the prayers of his loved ones that saved the life of Narayan Lal, and helped him in the feat.

But, O best beloved, at least some of those

who witnessed the feat believed otherwise. I, the faithful chronicler of the Great King, afterwards heard from the Story-teller of their foul calumnies. For on the night of the trial the usual crowd of knaves came to the low den at the outskirts of the city and discussed Narayan Lal's feats with evil tongues. First, the feat of turning the piece of leather into a live serpent.

"Easy enough!" said the ex-scribe, he that was the sage amongst this vile crew. "It is the usual practice of an expert juggler to lead up to his best feat gradually. Thus to gain the confidence of his spectators from the start, he performs some impromptu feat, which, however trivial, is likely to excite wonder by its very spontaneity. To do this, it is his most usual practice to produce suddenly some live creature from the person of one of the spectators—as a rule the most forward or aggressive one among them; and the more startling and repugnant the creature (for instance, a snake, a frog, a lizard) the greater is the merriment of the other spectators, and hence the greater the general

success of the feat. Thus it is the juggler's custom to carry some such creature about him (for instance, under his waistband), though in the present case it was fated to fulfil a sterner purpose than to cause merriment."

"But how came Narayan Lal to possess the serpent," objected the man that had his nose slit open with a lancet, "after being so long in captivity?"

The ex-scribe smiled in superior wisdom. "His friends! The *guru* and the brethren who had access to him daily! And with what other contrivances they have furnished him, for possible future trials, none can tell."

"But how could he carry the live serpent safely about his person? Methinks it might have crawled out at any moment, or even have bitten him to death."

"O simple one!" cried the scribe in derision, "knowest nothing of narcotics that would reduce a serpent to sleep, to lethargy, or to complete coma for twenty long hours? And after the clever substitution of the serpent for the

leather, knowest not that the subsequent wriggling, to and fro, backwards and forwards, would remove the comatose effects, and gradually awaken the serpent to full activity?"

Then all cried out in unison, "Now tell us of the second feat—how the juggler drank the poisons, and brought them back out of his mouth, dry!"

The sage pulled at his hookah in silence awhile, cleared his throat, and gave forth this fragment of wisdom:

"To every poison there is an antidote—if we could only find it. But strange as it may seem, the antidote to two poisons administered together is sometimes easier to find than the antidote to each separately; for the two poisons may to some extent neutralise each other. Now, if a third substance could be found that would complete this neutralisation, then the three taken together would be quite harmless to kill—though indeed their nervous effects might still remain, such as cramp and heavy sweat, and subsequently temporary weakness and partial

paralysis. This third substance—a light oleaginous stone found only in the deserts of Rajputana, which, when pulverised into fine powder, had the peculiar property of chemically combining with diamond-dust and *datura*, and thus forming in union with them a new and innocuous substance—either the *guru* or some other friend of the juggler had discovered, and managed to convey to him secretly."

But a mocking voice answered the sage: "But how did he bring back the powders separately and dry—and then prove by the death of the crows that the poisons were *not* innocuous? Tell us that, O man of much wisdom!"

The sage gave back scorn for scorn. "Knowest not, O foolish one, that an expert juggler is trained from his earliest childhood to carry small objects in his throat, such as a silver coin? In fact, when the future juggler is four or five years of age, the trainer takes a small coin, bores a hole at the rim, ties a silk thread to it, and holding one end of the thread makes the child swallow the coin—only as far as the

throat. There he keeps the coin for only five seconds; thus every day for twelve months. Then gradually he increases the duration, also chooses a successively larger coin as the child grows up—till after fifteen years, when the child is grown to be a man, a natural cavity has been formed in the throat. In this, on either side of the root of the tongue, the juggler can now carry two thin silver capsules, and operate on them by an adroit movement of the tongue.

"Now, when the king had sealed up the two packages of poisons, some friend of the juggler must have learnt of that fact from the royal alchemist, and obtained from him a similar supply of the same poisons. These, hidden in the silver capsules, he had contrived to convey to the juggler in his prison. Thus, O foolish one," concluded the scribe, "it was not the identical poisons he had drunk in liquid form which Narayan Lal brought out of his mouth, dry. It was the supply in the hidden capsules!" And the sage closed his lips upon the neglected hookah, and refused to speak again.

But, O best beloved, the calumnies of such a vile crew as this are indeed endless. They would, if they could, explain away the very wonders of nature—of the gigantic tree that grows from the tiny seed, the very sun, moon and stars—then how glibly the marvels of man! Verily, to them nothing is sacred in heaven and earth and the waters beneath. They would explain all things away in the name of science! Faugh! they make me sick!

And, O beloved, at the next trial could any mortal man explain away the feat? Verily it was beyond human anticipation, beyond the power of twice forty thousand friends—if indeed all that witnessed it were friends—to succour Narayan Lal in that supreme crisis, that stupendous conflict. For, seeing that the chances were slipping by, Narayan Lal's master resolved in the last trial to make him face such a peril as no man had escaped before or since.

Chapter Eleven

THE VERDICT OF PARAMESHWAR

KNOW, O Son of Heaven, that when doubt like a cankerworm eats into the human heart each attempt to remove the doubt serves but to nerve it to new strength in its hold; each attempt to prove that it is false serves but to reveal new reasons to prove that it is true. Thus was it in the heart of Narayan Lal's master. Five times had he wrestled with and driven back the tempter at his ear, trying to believe that Narayan Lal was innocent; and five times the tempter had returned, bringing seven more tempters with him to show that Narayan Lal was guilty.

Thus, in this the last trial, he resolved to put Narayan Lal to such a test as would either cause his certain death, or prove his innocence beyond doubt. If *Parameshwar* had accepted

the original terms of the ordeal, He would fulfil them in their entirety; would snatch back Narayan Lal from the jaws of death, even in the last hour, if he were truly innocent of guilt. Thus he resolved to make the test such that no human aid could succour him. Divine aid could, if it would; that would be the manifestation of *Parameshwar*. He would accept then that manifestation.

Forsooth long afterwards men said that it was tempting fate; that it was demanding a sign from *Parameshwar*. But as against this, sages had answered that those who had long suffered and had submitted themselves to the Eternal design, had the right to such a sign in the crisis of their life. And this was, indeed, the crisis in the king's own life—not merely that of Narayan Lal.

For if the youth suffered death in this trial the king's own life would be wrecked for ever. He loved his daughter dearly, but not more dearly than he loved honour. The death of the youth would imply the death of the princess—

and his own everlasting despair. Thus indeed was this the crisis in each of three lives, not merely of one. Then when was there a greater right to a sign, if not now?

By royal proclamation all men were bidden to come to the ancient amphitheatre that lay outside the city; why, it was not revealed to any; but all guessed that it was to witness Narayan Lal's death—or triumph.

Three hundred cubits north of the city there arose a line of hills, licking the blue sky with a thousand tongues of sal and toon; between the foot of the hills and the city wall lay the amphitheatre.

It was a circular structure, a hundred and fifty cubits across. The outer wall was crumbling to dust. Well it might. Five-and-twenty centuries ago it had first witnessed the battles of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* fought within it with sword and lance, even to the spilling of blood;[1] and in these latter days had wit-

[1] Some of the episodes from the great national epics of India were once re-enacted with vivid realism.

nessed scenes that were less heroic but more sensational.

Within the circular wall arose tier upon tier of raised seats of the purest Nerbudda marble: above them seats of Agra sandstone. The arena, a level sandy space eighty cubits across, lay beneath, surrounded by a stout wall that rose up ten cubits high, even to the base of the lowermost tier. At every dozen paces the wall was pierced for a tunnel, iron-gated at the entrance. Some were four cubits high, some eight. Within the dark caverns that lay beyond the iron bars, timorous men had whispered with bated breath that they had seen crouching forms that had blinked and glared at them with fearful eyes.

On the day of the trial twice ten thousand men came to the amphitheatre, the aristocracy and gentry filling the marble seats, the middle classes finding room upon the sandstone. But of the vulgar multitude twice that number clambered up the hillside opposite, and there sat upon the grass, eating cold *chappaties*, and

laughing and chatting as if they had come to see a fine *tamasha*, not the death of a living man. They were bidden to come an hour before sunset; but the sun was scarce past the zenith when the hillside was a shimmering mass of red and purple, yellow and orange, against the green. Thrice twenty thousand men had come to make a holiday.

There were strange scenes that day in the city. A ceaseless stream of men filled the streets and by-lanes, all seeking the amphitheatre on the hills. Here and there little groups of men stood by street corners, awaiting the arrival of friends. They spoke in low whispers; and in their eyes there was a strange gleam, such as in the eyes of those that had suddenly seen light in dark places.

"Brothers, this morn I was bathing in the sacred Ganges an hour before sunrise——"

"A very meritorious deed!" sneered a passer-by, pausing awhile to let the sneer rankle.

"——And even as the morning star was paling in the east, I saw——"

"What sawest thou, O Seer?" It was a sudden laugh from the back; for the little group had now swelled into a throng.

"——A ball of light falling from heaven far away on the west," finished the speaker, with a catch in his breath. He was a timorous man, and the terror in his voice matched the terror in his eye.

There was an instant hush. Signs in the heavens were the most solemn of portents.

"And then, O brother?"

"It came swiftly nearer the earth in a line of white light; then when it stood over the royal palace, it suddenly turned blood-red, and burst into ten thousand fragments. Yet, O brothers, I heard no sound!"

"Ay, but a moment later a gentle shower of rain fell, and blotted out the red sparks from the sky." It was a meek-faced Vishnuvite that gave this hope.

Then the passer-by that had stopped to sneer, laughed aloud in his superior wisdom. "O foolish brothers! It was but a shooting-star. It

burst, not over the royal palace, but three *kos* [six miles] beyond, and a full *kos* from the earth; thus no sound was heard. And the rain came because of the disturbance in the clouds."

But a snow-bearded oracle that had heard all these things, rebuked him, saying:

"Thou dost see only with the eye of the body. Canst not read also with the eye of the soul? Canst not hear the voice of the Deity in the rolling thunder, and read His handwriting in the flashing lightning?"

Then amid the hushed silence, a small voice whispered:

"Read to us this message, O man of wisdom!"

"It means that a great wrong will be done this day; but, like a gentle shower of rain, mercy will come to right the wrong. I have spoken. Peace be with you."

Saying this, he departed. But even in that moment they had recognised him. For it was he that on the day of the first trial had spoken

of a little infant found floating in a wicker basket on the bosom of the Ganges.

But ere this new hope could take root in their hearts, other men came with omens of woe.

"Brothers, know you the big tigress in the royal menagerie that has given birth to two cubs? This morn she went mad, and killed and ate her own progeny; then suddenly realising her deed, she grew madder still, and flung herself upon the iron bars in the frenzy of despair.

"Yea, brothers," added another, "seeing the people beyond, she tore at the bars with her fangs to get at them. And, methinks, had not the keepers beat her back from the outside with red-hot irons, she had killed herself in her rage."

Then others, more fanciful or more observant, took up the tale of woe with many embellishments.

"A sweet-voiced woman, singing behind pinjra lattice with the *esthraj's* dulcet harmony had suddenly hushed her voice, clung to her lord

as if stricken with blindness, and lain in his arms cowering with fear. . . . "

"There is sorrow in the palace, O brothers. Thrice the king hath awakened from his sleep with a start, crying out: 'Begone, tempter!' He seemed to be wrestling with some evil spirit that tormented him."

And yet another came, and spoke of a *pahari* woman that had lost her son on his wedding-day, and had herself fallen dead in grief, crying out with her last breath that she would haunt the earth till she found her son—at which portent all that heard marvelled; for the soul of a *pahari* woman had no love, and was cruel and pitiless—even like unto the soul of the tigress that had killed her own progeny.

"A terrible day! A day of wrath!"

Saying this, the crowd dispersed—and went forth to the hillside to make holiday.

And now all eyes were upon the ivory throne. At the southern diameter of the arena, and facing the hills, was a tall archway, seven cubits

wide and twice as high. It was also protected by an iron-barred gate that could be raised or lowered like a portcullis. The archway reached beyond the city wall, even to the adjoining court of the royal palace.

And above the dome of the gallery, and upon a marble daïs, was the ivory throne, inlaid with gold, and incrusted at the arms and head with diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Over it there floated in the soft breeze a purple canopy of Dacca's loveliest brocade, embroidered with ten thousand stars and moons of alternate gold and silver.

Seeing this glory and pomp, all there wondered. Instinctively they felt that there was some hidden purpose in the heart of the king to make this scene linger in their memory for ages to come; why, they could not guess.

And the wonder grew all the greater when beside the throne, but a little below it, they caught a glimpse of a low divan beneath a pile of shawls, and upon them a dagger, a goblet, and a silken cord. What they signified none

could tell; but some, shaking their heads dubiously, and shaking the dust off their feet, departed from the amphitheatre, muttering that they approved not of such unbending sternness.

And then the heavy curtains behind the daïs parted, and a tall figure in blue and scarlet stepped forth, and raising a silver trumpet to his lips sent forth a loud blast to the north. From the north the answer came, for suddenly another trumpeter had appeared across the amphitheatre. Then another from the east, and another from the west.

Whilst yet the echoes were mingling together among the hills, the curtains behind the daïs were flung aside, revealing two rows of stalwart men that held their swords aloft to form an arch. Then from beneath it there appeared the king. He was robed in royal *kincob*, and crowned with a diamond aigrette upon his turban.

Erect even in age, he walked to the throne with measured tread; then even as he sat upon it, he raised his right hand.

In almost instant response a dull grating sound was heard. Slowly the iron gate in the archway lifted, and from there came forth two men, with one other between them. They walked to the arena, turned and bowed to the king. Then without a word they led their prisoner to the centre of the arena to a stake driven into the sand. There it had stood unnoticed so long, scarce large enough at that distance to merit attention. Making him face the king, they bound the prisoner to the stake with a stout cord, winding it first around each ankle, then upwards around the knees, the thighs, the waist, the breast, the arms, even up to the neck. Thus they left him, and departed from the arena.

"Narayan Lal, what is written upon thy brow from thy birth will be fulfilled to the very letter, heaven and earth notwithstanding. If it be death, then let it be death. A brave man should know how to die. Hast thou aught to say?" And there was not a tremor in the voice of the king as he said this.

But for an answer the prisoner glanced

upwards, and gazed upon the king—rather at some vision beyond the throne that he saw in the eye of the mind, not of the body. Yes, what was written upon his brow from his very birth! Was it for this that he was born—a traitor's death? Or, to sit upon a throne?

And then in his inmost heart there arose another yearning. For six long months his eyes had not beheld that vision of beauty which was truly the sole cause, the sole price, of his death. Then in this hour of final dereliction would he be denied its last comfort? Would his glazing eyes, as he yielded up his soul, be denied one glance of pity from *her* eyes? One little word of love, one single teardrop?

Then in that hour his manhood forsook him.

"Justice! Justice, O King! Give me justice!" It was a shriek of agony that broke from his lips. For a strong man, a brave man, losing his manhood is a terrible thing, and not good to see or hear or dream of.

But the stern level voice of the king answered him.

"What is written is written. Cry justice to Him that made thee, and not to me."

Then, whilst yet these words were undried upon his lips, there came a strange softness into his eyes; and when he spoke again his voice was hoarse and husky.

"Narayan Lal, to see thee die I desire much; but to see thee live—and triumph—I desire more. Pray that *Parameshwar* save thee." And there was a quiver in his voice that none but Narayan Lal could understand. For in that moment it was the father that spoke, not the king.

And now a sudden silence fell upon that vast multitude. Twice forty thousand men lost their tongues, and gazed before them like dazed children.

A heavy, rumbling sound was heard, and a while later a dozen men appeared in the gallery, dragging by a hawser what seemed to be a car resting on four broad wheels, each scarce a foot off the ground. The car was about ten cubits long, six wide, and seven high. What it contained none could tell; for it was covered

over with a straw matting. But from the sound it made all guessed that there was much iron about its make; yet not all iron.

They dragged the car and placed it before Narayan Lal, just two cubits away. Without a word they whipped off its straw covering, and, stepping aside, stood at attention.

And then there arose a cry of horror from a thousand lips; a thousand moans of pity were wrung out of a thousand hearts; a thousand——

But the cold relentless voice of the king hushed them all.

"Narayan Lal, thou shalt be placed at the mercy of thy enemy; yet not altogether within its reach. If within the hour, ere the sun goes down, it can reach thee, then thy death will be the just reward of thy guilt. But within the hour *Parameshwar* may save thee—if He so will. I have spoken."

Verily, *Parameshwar* alone could save him. For within the iron-barred cage was the self-same tigress that had killed her own progeny,

and had sought to kill and kill and kill all men. An enormous beast, seven cubits long, such as the jungles yield but once in a generation.

Without a word the dozen guards stepped up to the cage, six on either side, and placing their hands upon the edges, drew off the iron gratings; for verily the iron bars were but an outer coating. The cage itself was of pliable bamboo, bound at the joints with Malacca cane.

It was but a slender hedge that stood between Narayan Lal and his savage foe.

And now, the dozen guards having departed and lowered the portcullis behind them, the two were left face to face.

For a moment the tigress hesitated. Accustomed to dwell within bars, she had failed to notice any change in their nature; and the sight of many men passing and repassing before her had been scarce worth attention.

But gradually it began to dawn upon her that there was now something strange and unwonted before her; for the more savage a beast is, the greater is its curiosity or its suspicion.

She saw a solitary man standing motionless before her cage; and the cage itself was not like unto her usual dwelling-place. Its walls were of the colour of her own body, and seemed to be like unto things she vaguely remembered she had seen in the jungle in the days of freedom.

She rose up, stepped to the front of the cage, stood up on her hind legs, and scrutinised her victim. Suddenly she thrust out her right paw between the bamboo bars. It reached to within a span of Narayan Lal's face, the bars yielding to her efforts. A second thrust, a third, a fourth. The cage creaked and groaned; the bamboos bent and curved outwards—then as quickly sprang back to their original shape.

Suddenly there was a dull grinding sound. She snapped at a vertical bamboo with her fangs, tore at it, chewed it, tugged it—Snap!

It was a gaping space a foot square.

Without thought she plunged her head at it. One fierce push—her hind legs upon the floor,

her back arched up above them—and half the head was out. And then—and then——

But the pliable bamboos sprang back in their elasticity. The top end of the broken rod pressed against her head, at the most sensitive part. The bottom end pressed upwards between her chin and throat—also an intensely sensitive part.

Maddened with rage, and somehow seeking to vent it upon the only living creature before her, she strove to thrust out her neck from between the shoulders. An inch, two inches, three inches —and the projecting bamboo grazed along three inches of her head. She twisted her neck round, shot out her head recklessly—and the jagged end of the lower bamboo bit her throat like a hundred teeth. Her jaws opened wide, and snapped fiercely at the air; but for the intervening span she had crunched her victim's head in that snap.

And all the while Narayan Lal stood before her, powerless to recede an inch. He felt a spasm at his heart; something arose in his

throat, and seemed to shut out the breath of life; something arose as a mist before his eyes, enveloping and magnifying the terror they beheld.

He saw those frightful fangs, those sawing jaws keeping hideous time with the yellow blinking eyes; in his dulled ear he heard the sound of creaking bamboo and bursting cane—and thought it to be the sound of crunching bones and tearing flesh. *His* bones, *his* flesh.

Inch by inch he saw that cruel face come nearer and nearer. He felt her horrible breath upon his brow, his cheeks, his lips—he felt that a while later her enormous jaws would engulf his head in a single bite. Into that moment the agony of a thousand years was encompassed, for he stood powerless to move a single finger to save his life! Oh, if he were but free to do battle for that life! Then he would sell his life dearly; would fight with his bare hands where fire and sword might have availed naught.

And now the sweat of death stood in beads over his brow; the first shock of terror quaked his limbs and twitched his face. For the bravest

man might quail to meet such a death, to yield up his life in such impotence. He closed his eyes in that first shock of terror. . . .

But a moment after something whispered in his ear, and reminded him of the decree of fate; reminded him that the will of *Parameshwar* would be done, kings and potentates notwithstanding; reminded him also that twice forty thousand men were gazing upon his dying moments. In that thought his manhood was given back to him. If die he must, he would stare death in the face unmoved.

He opened his eyes and saw the tigress now half a span before him; from the far distance they seemed to be face upon face—like two long-parted lovers kissing each other. To *him* the kiss would come in but a moment. And in that kiss he would lose, not his heart, but his head; for the tigress would embrace his whole head in that kiss.

What though he felt the seconds grow into hours, and the minutes into years? All too soon the embrace would come. Was he awaiting his

bride? Behold, even now his bride was opening her lips to close upon his own.

What though he felt the fascination of her eyes, felt their terrible beauty overpower him and engulf his senses in coming torpor? Behold, it was the ecstacy of the bridegroom that felt the sweet breath of his beloved upon his face.

What though he heard in his swooning ears the sound of creaking, crackling—snapping—bursting reeds? In that moment he heard the sweet twinkling of jewels upon his bride's arms, and upon her brow and bosom. . . .

And then there arose a cry of agony that thrilled through twice forty thousand hearts. For it came, not from the dying man, but from his judge! His king, his master.

With tottering feet he stood up before his throne—striving to point one trembling hand at something that he saw before him. And then, ere his parched lips could find utterance, all there saw—and felt—and realised.

It seemed to be a bundle of white that dropped from the wall into the arena below. It lay still

a moment as it reached the sand; then casting off the white cloak, it arose and ran swiftly towards the cage—a slender form draped in mauve and purple! It held a small glittering thing above its head. A Dakheen dagger.

She cut frantically at the cords that bound Narayan Lal—and the coils spun round and round, and released him from the stake.

"Devala!"

"My love."

Like a drunken man he reeled aside—then grasped the post to steady himself. Verily, it was his *bride* that had come to him. It was *her* breath that he felt upon his face—his brow, his cheeks, his lips, his heart. It was indeed the tinkle of her jewels that he heard in his ear, and felt their sweet touch upon his bosom.

"Come, my love—come away!" In that moment it was she that spoke first. Of the two her strength was the greater.

But he only shook his head, still holding the post.

"Why, beloved?"

Something laid hands of ice upon her heart. She saw the vacant glassy stare in his eyes—and felt a constriction at her heart, staying its beat. Were his senses gone for ever? In that cruel agony had he lost his reason?

"Because of the beast, my love!"

But like a sleepy child he laid his head upon his arm, seeking rest.

Then she came to his side and entwined her arms around him. She dared not look beside her; for beside her the jaws of the tigress were hungering for their prey. From before the face of death she snatchced away her beloved.

"Canst walk, my heart?" She entwined one arm around his waist, and placed his head upon her shoulder with the other. Thus holding him to her, she snatched him from the jaws of death.

"Where goest, beloved? I am so tired."

He stopped half-way to the wall, and leaned upon her breast. And what mattered had he reached the wall itself? He could not escape.

Then sighing helplessly, her own strength

"SHE CUT FRANTICALLY AT THE CORDS THAT BOUND NARAYAN LAL"

gave way. Slowly they bent and bent, clinging to each other—then suddenly sank upon their knees, upon the sand. She laid his head upon her breast, rocking him there and speaking words that were foolish and senseless. Her eyes glistened but refused to weep.

She heard a sound that come to her as the sentence of death. It was a roar of pain and rage that suddenly seemed to swell into a roar of triumph. She also heard another sound that arose before her, behind her, all around her—a confused sound of eight myriad men that having lost their tongues had found them in the same moment.

"To the rescue, O brothers! To the rescue!"

"Ye fools—ye cowards—come!"

"See! Half the beast is out of the cage!"

"Art afraid of a beast when a woman dies?"

"Throw him a sword—a lance!"

"Him, ye fools? Her. Can ye not see he has swooned?"

"To the rescue! To the rescue!"

"*Harr! Harr!* Mahadeo!"

"*Jai! Jai!* Kali Mai!"

"To the Princess. To the Princess!"

A thousand swords leapt in the air. A thousand men rushed to the parapet. A thousand men stood upon it, taking breath to hurl themselves upon the sand——

"Stay! Let no man move—at the peril of his life!"

It was a deep hollow voice that checked them all.

Tall, towering, pale and emaciated, the king stood before the throne. In his eyes there shone a strange unearthly light; his breast heaved with some nameless emotion that struggled within and refused to be stifled.

"Let this be *her* trial also. It were but a choice of death. Let no man move!"

Then a great fear came upon them all; for in that moment they realised for the first time that indeed the princess also was upon her trial; that at best it was but a choice of death between the beast—and the dagger, the cup, or the silken cord.

"Let it be the beast—if *Parameshwar* so decrees." And sitting down upon the throne the king stared before him, seeing and not seeing; like one that was stricken with sudden blindness.

And now with a frantic roar—and a crash and a snap—the tigress cleared the cage. She fell upon the sand to the left of the stake, gazed upon the multitude straight before her, blinked and glared at the setting sun. Conscious only of the sensation of the moment, the first sense that came to her was the sense of liberty. The sight of many men was not altogether new to her; the sense of liberty was.

She leaped and gambolled, curving and then straightening out her limbs like steel springs, and throwing off the sand from beneath her velvet paws in a shower around her. She rejoiced in her new-found freedom. She had forgotten her victims.

Then suddenly she espied them; being towards the side and thirty cubits away, they had escaped her notice so far. But now she saw

them—and in a moment her nature changed. A cruel look came into her eyes—the look of a wild beast sighting its prey. Her back arched up behind her, and her forepaws met before her. Her tail swung to the right, to the left, then straightened out behind. From that distance she prepared to leap. And then—and then——

"Come, my heart, awaken! The hour is at hand." It was the voice of the maiden calling her beloved. At that supreme moment her strength came back to her.

What mattered it to her now that her dream was ended? For six long months she too had struggled—struggled silently, voicelessly, unseen by men. Her beloved had struggled before a king and a nation. She had fought silently within stone walls.

And now the end had come; the end of all her hopes, her prayers, her tears. She was no longer a princess; rather a simple maiden that had loved truly, and for her love was about to die.

"Beloved, awaken! Canst not hear me? The beast is upon us!" Her heart went out in that cry.

And hearing that cry, her beloved awakened. He raised his head from her lap where it had lain in his swoon; and gazed before him. Then light came back to his soul. Then also his strength was given back to him. . . .

And now they knelt upon the sand, hand in hand. From that distance they seemed not like a youth and a maiden; rather like two little children that were lost and had none to claim them. They faced the beast, and knelt down side by side, resting upon their heels and bowing their heads.

And never a word escaped their lips. What was in their hearts none could tell; holding each other by the hand—seeing death together face to face—seeking to mingle their life-blood together in their dying moment—what was in their hearts none could tell. Perchance it was a hymn of joy. What finer death could they have than that?

The tigress leapt. Up, up in the air—then down in a fearful curve. With a soft thud she fell upon the sand, and gathered herself up for the last spring. Full half the distance she had spanned in that single leap.

"Beloved, art afraid of death?"

"Not with thee, dearest. Let this be my—*suttee*."

And then the maiden broke down utterly, belying her brave words. She that had held up her courage whilst he lay swooning in her arms, broke into sobs and tears when he had regained his manhood. For now that he was a man, she herself had become a woman.

"Close thine eyes, beloved; the tigress leaps!" And saying this, he calmly arose to place himself before the maiden.

But she checked him with a hand, seeking to die together, not after him. "It will not be long, dearest. Even now it comes! . . ."

And even in that moment a cry of wonder broke from the multitude.

"Look, O brothers! The beast is mad!"

"——Has lost her senses."

"——Her *strength!*"

For suddenly the tigress had changed her purpose. Relaxing her arched back from its rigid tension, she lurched sideways and came circling round them.

"She only plays with them like a cat——"

"And will kill them like a mouse."

"But see again, O brothers. She cannot leap!"

For stopping suddenly, she crouched before them, lashed her tail from side to side in rising fury—then as suddenly swerved round and continued in her course. And all the while the youth and the maiden knelt upon the sand, hand in hand.

"Ho! The beast is *blind!* She does not *see* them!"

For now the tigress paused before them, not six cubits away, and gazed above their heads. Out in the far distance the sun was sinking upon a bank of cloud in a ball of fire. And the poor mad beast that had killed her own progeny,

gazed upon the sinking sun—and forgot her victims.

Perchance in that moment some dumb instinct awakened to life within her; some instinct that had long lain dormant; some instinct finer than the instinct of ferocity and bloodshed.

Perchance the remembrance came back to her of the days of freedom and happiness in the jungle—for even beasts have moments of happiness—when hungering herself, she had given her breast to her free-born cubs at the hour of sunset. For verily, gazing upon the setting sun, had she eaten a ball of sand in her hunger[1]—and had fed her cubs with the milk of her breast.

Lowering her eyes from the sun, she saw the kneeling forms before her, even at her feet; saw their bowed heads that now lay together, bent low upon the sand. Then something burst in her mighty heart, and gurgled up through her throat. It was a piteous whine of incontrollable pain and anguish.

[1] A popular belief in India.

Then she licked their faces, their hands, their feet, and burrowed in the sand before them, trying to lift them to her bosom.

"See, he has charmed the beast!" It was an awe-stricken voice from the lowermost tier.

"No! She takes them for her cubs."

"Wrong again. It is the soul of the *pahari* woman that has entered into the tigress."

The someone added: "Verily, the soul of the woman that had lost her son on his wedding-day, and having died herself, had sworn to return."

"And the maiden is his bride."

Then, seeing this marvel, however it might have been caused, a great stillness fell over them all. They clutched at their beating hearts, and forgot to breathe.

Hark! What was that? A dull thud, a distant shriek; the clanging and rattling of chains. The sound came from afar, from somewhere beyond the arena. The dense multitude sat impotent and still, scarce realising its import.

Suddenly a man, sitting beneath the royal daïs, arose from his seat. Ere the multitude

understood his purpose, he gained the wall and leapt into the arena. Arising from the fall, he ran swiftly forward, drawing his sword as he went.

"At last I have reached thee! Die, traitor!"

He thrust with his blade—but a moment sooner Narayan Lal had leapt to his feet. Lifting the maiden in his arms, he sprang to the other side of the reclining tigress.

Thus the two men faced each other a moment—across the beast. Though he recognised his assailant, Narayan Lal knew not why he sought his life, even at the peril of his own. Perchance the assailant's own life was doomed, unless he slew Narayan Lal; thus his purpose was to kill the youth, and take the chance of escaping the tigress and the multitude afterwards. All this passed through Narayan's mind in the instant's flash.

Hearing the sound of words, the reclining tigress gazed up from the sand and saw the intruder. Vaguely she seemed to realise that she had found her cubs already; and this was not

one of them. She raised herself upon her fore-paws and stretched forth her head——

A confused clamour, a roar of voices, the crash of falling metal. The iron-barred gate beneath the archway came clanging down as if uprooted by some ponderous battering-ram. An ominous snorting, trumpeting, like the blast of a cracked horn—and a huge elephant burst into the arena.

The spell was broken. The multitude that had sat still like dazed children, broke forth in a babel of words.

"The high executioner!"

"The inflicter of death on traitors!"

"But see, it is in *musth!*"

Then in new terror they saw that the beast had broken loose from its heel-chains; and its mahout was not upon its head. Perhaps his mangled body was lying in yonder courtyard. For a male elephant in *musth* is worse than a raging tigress. Naught may appease its frenzy, save to kill and kill and kill.

O *Bhugwan*, what marvellous sight was this!

With the instinct of her nature the tigress recognised her hereditary foe of the jungle. Her back arched up on the instant, her limbs became like tense steel. She forgot the human intruder and faced the mad elephant. On her other side were her new-found cubs.

And at sight of the elephant, the inflicter of death on traitors, a sudden panic seized the intruder's heart. Narayan Lal's assailant fled before the wind, and sought shelter behind the bamboo cage.

The elephant came hurtling along, digging up the sand with its tusks. Reeling drunkenly, blinking its little red eyes in the sudden glare, it saw nothing; its vengeance was for the sand. Thus it went headlong to the centre of the area —and lurched up against the bamboo cage; the first definite object it had noticed.

For one brief moment it paused. The little tail switched; the huge trunk curled upwards; the drooping ears flapped up like a pair of wings —then in mad frenzy the elephant charged.

With a groan and a crash the cage went over

bodily. From beneath the falling bamboo the man escaped and fled terror-stricken to the side of the arena—the elephant in full chase behind.

Full half the circumference he ran; then the outstretched trunk, gaining upon him at each stride, caught him up by the middle—swung him aloft an instant, then hurled him to the ground. The next instant the huge forepaw reached him—half buried him in the sand by the stupendous pressure. A traitor's death!

The elephant stepped back, gazed down an instant, and grunted in approval of its work. Three strides more, kicking the sand in wanton sport, and the mad beast had come within range of its unnoticed foe.

An angry growl, a hissing snarl, a terrific roar—the tigress hurled herself through the air. With a sudden lurch the elephant recoiled upon its haunches; with the moment's instinct its trunk went up, slashing frantically at the huge yellow form soaring aloft to its head. But the tigress came aslant; the elephant's trunk just

flicked her flank. She passed beyond the head, and fell upon the sand on the other side. More nimble than her unwieldly foe, and turning more quickly, she leapt again at short range and gained the elephant's back, its head. There she fastened her fangs with the grip of death. Her forepaws came down on either side of her jaws, tore at the thick hide, seeking to reach the brain.

In mad terror the elephant ran, trumpeting shrilly, bearing the tigress upon its head. Thrice round the circumference it careered in its frenzy, its life-blood oozing from the wound in its head. Deeper and deeper sank the tigress's fangs and claws. The mad beast's trumpetings grew feebler and feebler; for its strength, mighty and irresistible a while ago, was now ebbing fast. Its foe had gripped it in its one vital part.

Suddenly its knees gave way, the trumpeting ceased. Slowly, inch by inch, it began to sink upon the sand. Its huge body shook in a gigantic tremor, then came down inch by inch upon

its bended knees. O *Parameshwar*, verily this was Thy deed, this sight of Thy creation! A mighty fine-tusked elephant, the monarch of the jungle and the lord of the battle-line, dying slowly, drop by drop, in silent majesty before the gaze of twice forty-thousand men struck dumb in speechless wonder! Verily this was Thy verdict, Thy manifestation, in Thy inscrutable wisdom! . . .

With the sweat of death upon its brow, the elephant made its last frantic effort. Endowed with an intelligence second only to man's, that intelligence had been obscured in the moment of panic. Now in the moment of death it returned with tenfold clearness. With its last ebbing strength the elephant curled up its trunk, felt softly beneath the tigress's throat with the delicacy of a man's finger—curled the trunk around the tigress's neck—tore her bodily away from its head, held her aloft an instant, brought her down before its bended knees. There the two swayed a moment in the air in the elephant's last spasmodic tremor. Then the trunk touched the

sand, the huge beast bent slowly forward—and fell prone upon the arena, upon the tigress. Thus locked in death together the two monarchs of the jungle lay silent and still before the gaze of man.

But, O *Parameshwar*, Thy manifestation was not yet over! There still remained the youth and the maiden in the arena. Locked in each other's arms, upon bended knees, they still awaited Thy verdict. What though the youth's last trial was over, his innocence proved? Verily he still awaited Thy fullest proclamation, O *Parameshwar!* . . .

Then suddenly amid the hushed silence a deep guttural voice shouted across the amphitheatre:

"*Jai! Jai!* Pertab Sinhji!"

The multitude gazed upon one another's faces, and wondered what this could mean.

"*Jai! Jai!* Raj Kumar *ke jai!* Shout, ye men—shout to the heavens!"

There, across the amphitheatre, stood a man upon the lowermost tier, leaning against the parapet and pointing a thin fleshless hand at

the youth in the arena. He was robed in a *choga* of embroidered gold, and wore a turban of the richest silk. But upon his brow there was written still in vermilion the broad trident of Vishnu. Then all knew him to be the pundit, the sage—him they had long known as Rama Krishna. Now a pundit no more, but the commander of many men.

"Shout, ye men! Shout Victory to the Royal Prince!"

Then that vast multitude lost their heads and shouted—they knew not why. Twice forty thousand men shouted to the mountains, the plains, the fields, the forests, the rivers, the valleys, even unto the clouds above.

"*Jai! Jai!* Raj Kumar *ke jai!*"

As one in a dream, the king gazed before him. What cry was this—"*Jai! Jai!*" To whom did they give that salutation that among mortals could only be given to a monarch upon his throne?

The cry of the multitude answered him. A hundred men leapt to the arena, and escorted

the youth and the maiden to the daïs above. There, awaking from his dream, the king placed them upon the divan beside his throne. And placing a bridal veil over the maiden's head, and nine rows of pearls around her neck—the self-same necklace that Hira Lal of Benares had given him, to be kept for the maiden's bridal day—he joined her hand to that of the youth.

Then Rama Krishna, standing up before the king, told a wondrous tale: How once a noble queen had placed her new-born infant upon his dead father's throne; and commanded all to do him homage; but that being vanquished by an upstart usurper who sought the life of the child, she had entrusted him to the sacred Ganges —and had made *suttee* of herself to join her dead husband.

"But who art *thou*, O pundit, that thou dost know these things?"

And Rama Krishna answered the king, "The Dewan (Prime Minister) of the child's dead father. I took up the beggar's gourd, to watch over the life of the child."

"And the man killed by the elephant, the inflicter of death upon traitors?" the king asked again.

Rama Krishna waved his hand, and a dozen men fetched the body from the arena and exposed the face. It was the Jemadar of the Palace!

"A double-dyed traitor, a spy in disguise within thy very palace—a secret emissary of the upstart usurper. He had risen to power in thy service, being sent by his master to slay the child secretly—or lose his own life. But the child escaped him by the decree of Fate.

"And now, O King," Rama Krishna said again, joining his hands to his brow, and bowing his head even to the feet of the youth, "the child has grown to be a man—the same that thou hast long known as Narayan Lal."

And the king proclaimed to the world, "Yea, Narayan Lal no more, but Pertab Sinhji for ever—by the right of his forefathers. And henceforth, by the right of my adoption,

Yuvoraj Kumar Prithiraj"—that is, Young King, Royal Prince, Son of Supreme King.

Then a veiled form came from the back of the divan and knelt at the feet of the Princess Devala. And the princes turned to her father and whispered into his ear.

The king waved his hand graciously, and Harnam Das, the Captain of the Guards, approached from the other side and knelt at his master's feet. The king joined his hand to Leila's, and the princess took from her bosom a row of diamonds and as a bridal dower clasped it upon that of the maiden who had served her so faithfully—whilst the multitude shouted to the heavens anew, and went forth to hold high carouse far into the night with palace bounty that was showered upon them so lavishly because of the double bridal.

Epilogue

"Thus endeth my tale, O Splendour of the Earth!" the Story-teller concluded, kissing the fringe of the silken sheet.

And the Great King, raising himself from his pillow, replied, "So also my sickness; for thy words of wisdom have taught me that a man may be in the grip of death, and may yet escape."

Then taking the pearls from around his neck, even according to his promise, he placed them himself upon the neck of the Story-teller.

And to me, his faithful chronicler, he turned and said, "And thou, O truthful recorder of many marvels, go forth into the world, and make known these things unto all men."

Thus, O best beloved readers, have I unto you. And some day perchance I shall return to the favour of your countenance and tell you many more marvels, O best beloved. Meanwhile, *salaam alikhum!*—peace be with you!

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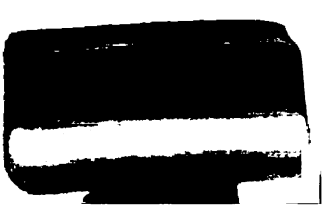
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